

| October 12, 2015 | SI.COM | @SINOW |

Sports Illustrated

MLB PLAYOFF PREVIEW

THE NEW JACKS

Toronto's October drought is finally over—but baseball's heaviest hitters (232 homers! Plus-221 run differential!) are just lumbering up

By **TOM VERDUCCI** P. 32



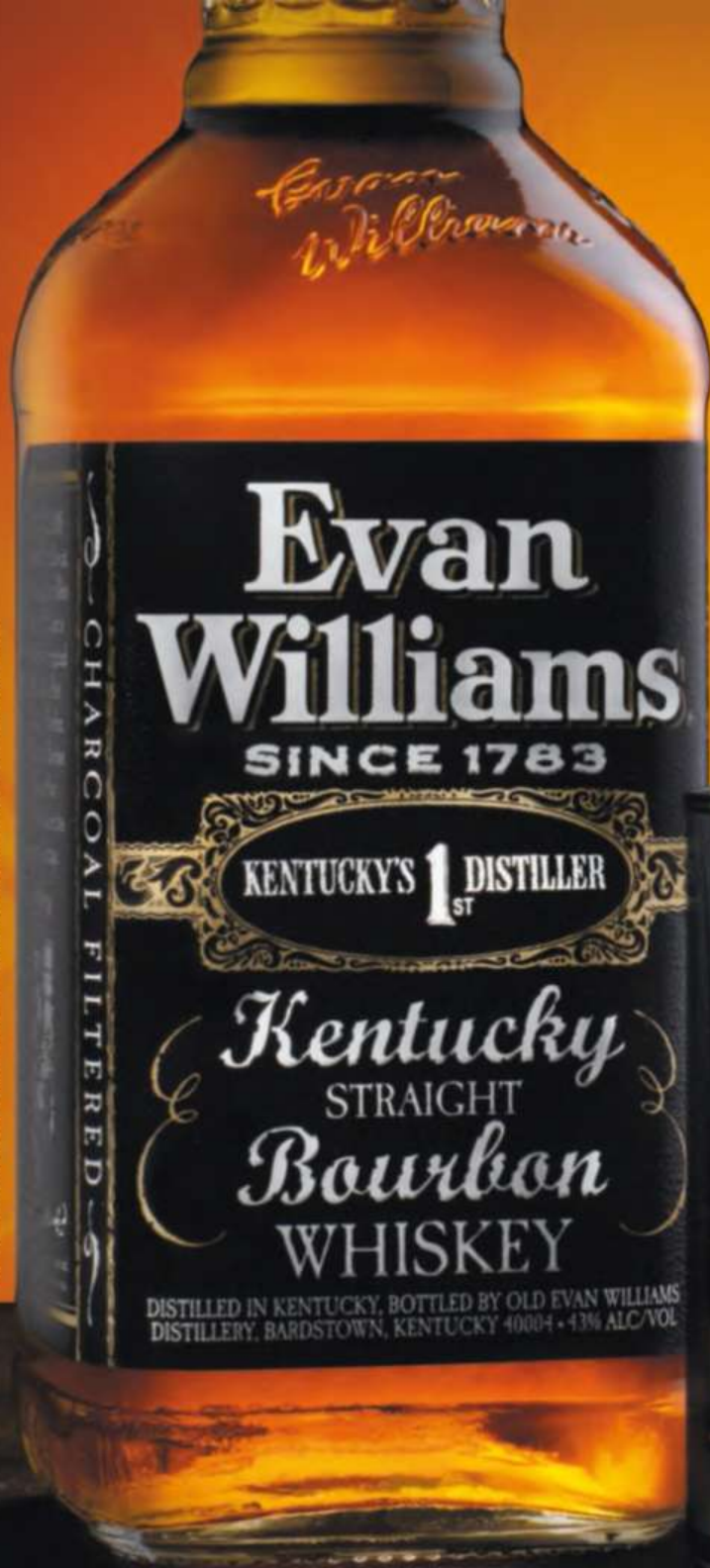
DH Edwin Encarnacion / **SS** Troy Tulowitzki / **P** David Price

C Russell Martin / **RF** Jose Bautista / **3B** Josh Donaldson

Manager JOHN GIBBONS

"I wanted to say that I won something in the big leagues. And I think there's more ahead than just the AL East."


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MLB PLAYOFF PREVIEW

32 Blue Jays

Their historic offense helped end the longest postseason drought in pro sports

By Tom Verducci

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The Cardinals' manager knows that on-field control is only part of the job

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The Raiders' DE went from hoop dreamer to ferocious pass rusher

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presented by Gatorade and Microsoft Surface

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A fan does what the Nationals can't: Gives D.C. World Series hope

By David Simon

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Divided we stand

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Shawn Oakman

Baylor's defensive end is scary good—but is he ready for the NFL?

By Greg A. Bedard

ON THE COVER:
Ben Van Hook for
Sports Illustrated

Photograph by
Darren Carroll for
Sports Illustrated

Sports Illustrated



"I think race car drivers in general . . . we're wired wrong."

—James Hinchcliffe

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE

The 28-year-old IndyCar driver discusses his horrific crash during an Indy 500 practice session in May and describes what it was like to get back behind the wheel

MAGGIE GRAY: *You were involved in a terrible accident in which you were impaled by a piece of your car. What do you remember about that day?*

JAMES HINCHCLIFFE:

Honestly, not a lot. I suffered a pretty serious concussion in addition to the leg and pelvis injuries, so most of my memory from that day is gone.

MG: *Have you watched footage of the crash?*

JH: Yeah, I've watched

it a lot. I think because I didn't have any memory of it, I had this fascination with what happened. I interviewed a lot of people to get a grasp of what really happened and what I went through that day.

MG: *You returned to the cockpit for a test run on Sept. 28. What was it like to strap in again and drive after your life-threatening injury?*

JH: It was so cool. I mean, we're so lucky to

be IndyCar drivers in the first place and get to race cars for a living. But then that opportunity almost got taken away, so it makes you appreciate it even more. To have gone through surgery and four months of healing, recuperating and rehabilitation, and then be given the O.K. to strap back in and drive and feel that energy was a humbling experience.

MG: *Were you also anxious or a bit nervous?*

JH: Honestly, no.

I've said this before.

I think race car drivers in general . . . we're wired wrong. There's something fundamentally not right with the way our minds work. I probably should have been a bit more nervous, but it's such a passion. We do this because we absolutely love it.

*For more of Hinchcliffe's interview, plus the SI Now archive, go to **SI.com/sinow***

TUNE IN



▶ **EPISODE: SEPT. 28**

Chicago Bliss players discuss the Legends Football League and its impact on female athletes



▶ **EPISODE: SEPT. 29**

SI writer Michael Beller thinks fantasy owners should draft Steelers QB Michael Vick



▶ **EPISODE: SEPT. 30**

SI senior writer Phil Taylor gives his thoughts on how Derrick Rose's latest injury will affect the Bulls



▶ **EPISODE: OCT. 1**

Rangers LW Rick Nash explains why NHL teams may not benefit from the new three-on-three OT



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+

1
of
3**Leading
Off**

Two of A Kind

■ What will you think about on those long, cold winter nights without baseball? Max Scherzer has a moment to savor by the fire. Two, actually: At Citi Field in New York City last Saturday he pitched his second no-hitter of the season (page 28), striking out 17 Mets and allowing just a single base runner, who reached on a sixth-inning error. Scherzer is the sixth pitcher with two no-nos in a season, but that doesn't capture his dominance in those outings: He allowed just a single base runner, a hit batsman, in his first as well.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
KATHY KMONICEK
AP





+

23

**Leading
Off**

Gator Crossing

■ Ole Miss went into the Swamp last Saturday as the No. 3 team in the country, having won its last two trips to Florida's home turf and nine of its 15 games there overall. The Gators began the season unranked and just last week crept into the Top 25. So naturally—welcome to life in the SEC—Florida wiped out the Rebels 38-10, thanks to a defense that held Ole Miss to 69 rushing yards and forced four turnovers, including this interception by junior defensive back Vernon Hargreaves III (1).

PHOTOGRAPH BY
LOREN ELLIOTT
TAMPA BAY TIMES/
ZUMAPRESS.COM



**Leading
Off**

+

3
of
3

Pink Slipup

Jaguars wideout Allen Robinson came within centimeters of making a catch that would have been beautiful for reasons far beyond his colorful gloves on Sunday. But the play—like the game—remained tantalizingly out of reach for Jacksonville in its visit to Indianapolis. The Jags outgained the Colts (431 yards to 326) and won the turnover battle (2-0), but rookie kicker Jason Myers missed a 53-yard try at the end of regulation and a 48-yarder in overtime. Indy's Adam Vinatieri converted his 27-yard attempt in OT for a 16-13 win.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
MICHAEL HICKEY
GETTY IMAGES





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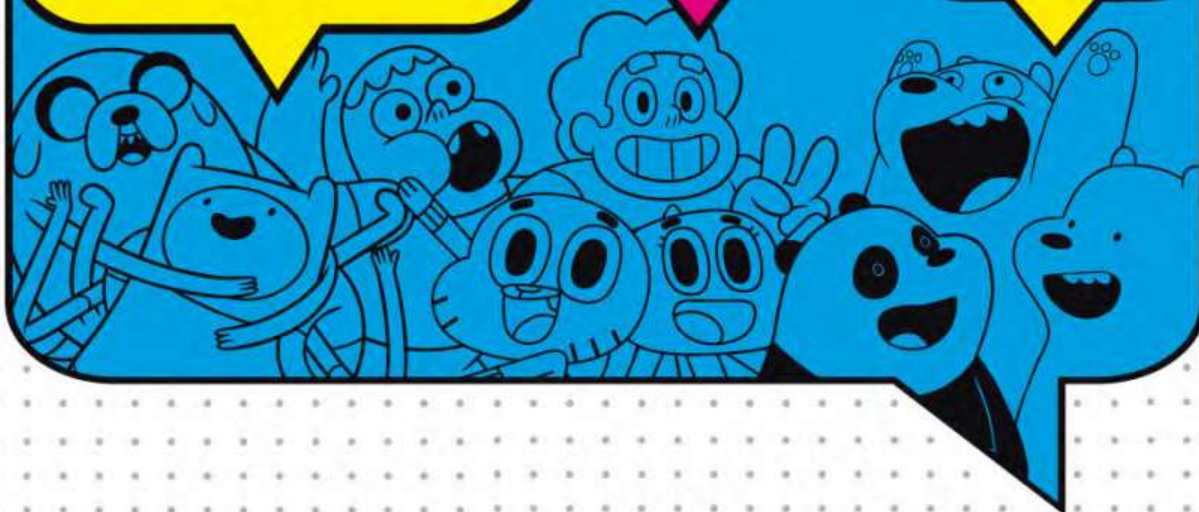
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INBOX

FOR SEPT. 28, 2015



COVER

No fairy dust was needed for Ole Miss's win over Alabama? A ricochet-off-a-helmet touchdown pass and two Crimson Tide fumbles inside their own 20? Heck, Tinker Bell rode the bus over from Oxford.

Brannon Jeffrey Buck
Birmingham



Reading Alexander Wolff's special report on **abusive coaching**, I wondered if the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team would have won gold were it not for the late Herb Brooks, a famously strict disciplinarian. I dare one of the psychology experts to tell a Navy SEAL, Army Ranger or Marine who survived basic training that "abusive" coaching tactics don't work.

John L. Byrwa, Winder, Ga.



PAGE 14

SCORECARD

The USFL lost nearly \$200 million, and yet **Donald Trump** claims, "We were killing the NFL." He reminds me of another supposedly great businessman, P.T. Barnum.

D. Scott Cunningham
Rio Rancho, N.M.

PAGE 12

LETTERS

I am dismayed by your negative, one-sided view of the **Patriots**. Why don't you investigate what the NFL is doing about measuring football pressure this year, since it is apparently such a big deal?

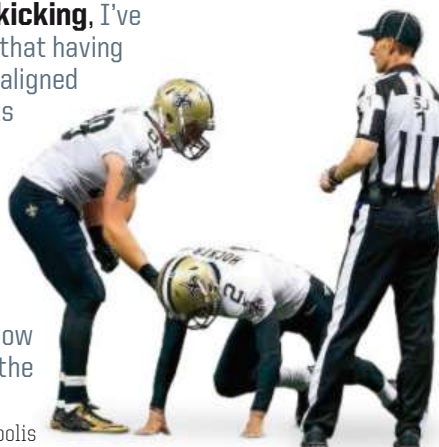
Larry Travers
Forestdale, Mass.

As a former college athlete and mother of high school and college athletes, I know firsthand the effect a coach can have on his or her players. Granted the latitude to mistreat students that no other school employee would be afforded, coaches can damage our sons and daughters in ways that may take years to heal.

Deborah Wentworth, Clemmons, N.C.

Regarding Andy Benoit's column on **NFL kicking**, I've always thought that having the hash marks aligned with the uprights is like giving a pro golfer two parallel lines to the edge of the cup. Rather than narrowing the goalposts, how about widening the hash marks?

Ron Beilke, Indianapolis



No doubt **Carlos Correa's** natural gifts and fierce work ethic helped develop his prodigious talent. However, I would argue that rather than coming "from nothing," the Astros' rookie shortstop had all the ingredients for success: a loving family and a father's unshakable faith in his son's capabilities.

Larry A. Fish
Springfield, Ohio

CORRECTION:

In "Imitation Game" in the Oct. 5 issue we incorrectly identified the photograph of Bruins goalie Tuukka Rask and the species of wasp named after him (*Thaumatodryinus tuukkaraski*). SI regrets the error.

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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

SCORECARD

Mixed Loyalties

As the U.S. and Mexico face off in a critical game in Pasadena, the rivalry is splitting Mexican-American *fútbol* fans—many of whom will root for the home team

BY GRANT WAHL

THE BRAMBILAS—

José and José Jr., of Ontario, Calif.—take pride in their close relationship and the bonds they’ve built through their mutual love of soccer. But when the U.S. meets archrival Mexico in Saturday’s CONCACAF Cup at a sold-out Rose Bowl in nearby Pasadena, theirs will be a house divided over the most fundamental of choices: Whose side are you on?

José Sr., a 55-year-old trucking company owner, will wear the green jersey of Mexico, like so many other Mexican-Americans who were born in the U.S. but grew up cheering for El Tri. But José Jr., a 21-year-old journalism student at University of La Verne (Calif.), is part of an emerging demographic of second- and third-generation hyphenates. A die-hard fan of the Stars and Stripes, he has a U.S. Soccer tattoo on his right forearm and chose his Twitter

handle (@Jozy_Brambila7) to honor forward Jozy Altidore.

“My dad teases me but not on the level of my mom’s side of the family in Mexico,” says José Jr. “They call me *pocho*”—a term for a person with Mexican roots who has embraced U.S. culture. “I tell them, ‘I love Mexico as a country. And I love my family. But I feel 100% American.’”

We hear a lot of talk these days about building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and it’s no surprise that the loudest voice behind those calls—Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump—has been a fixture of the buildup to the 65th soccer match between these neighboring nations. The Mexican television channel TV Azteca went viral with a hype video for the game featuring Trump’s voice laid over highlights of sad U.S. players. (“We don’t have victories anymore. . . . The American Dream is dead.”)

Against the backdrop of the Build-a-Wall debate, though, this week’s game can help remove barriers between the two countries and their respective sports cultures. First, this game matters: It’s arguably the most important U.S.-Mexico match since World Cup 2002, a showdown for regional supremacy and a berth in the ’17 FIFA Confederations Cup—essentially a World Cup dry run—in Russia. What’s more, fans of *each* team have come to care in critical mass. Unlike previous U.S.-Mexico games at the Rose Bowl, in which Mexico fans filled 90%

ON THE LINE

The winner of the Oct. 10 showdown will play in the 2017 Confederations Cup, a preamble to the ’18 World Cup.





ILLUSTRATION BY ANDRE DEGRAFF; RAY CARLIN/CON SPORTSWIRE (FANS)

of the stadium, the 83,000 spectators Saturday are expected to be much more evenly balanced, more like 60–40 in Mexico’s favor.

That change is partly attributable to CONCACAF’s allotment of large blocks of tickets to the U.S. and Mexican federations for distribution, but there are also simply more hard-core U.S. fans these days. Korey Donahoo, cofounder of the supporters group American Outlaws, says his organization nearly doubled in size around World Cup 2014, growing from 18,000 to 32,000 members in

what are now 180 chapters (the latest: AO Anchorage). More than 4,000 AO members will travel to Pasadena from all over the U.S. Not to be outdone, Pancho Villa’s Army, a U.S.-based supporters group for Mexico fans, will also be on hand with some 1,500 members.

If you’re under age 35, it’s unlikely that you’ve sensed any stigma attached to being a soccer fan in the U.S.; *fútbol* is cool these days. Breaking down the demographics by Facebook likes (a rough estimate), the American Outlaws are most popular among ages 25 to 34 (35%), 18 to 24 (26%) and 35 to 44 (19%). Anecdotally, at least, those young supporters include an increased number of U.S. fans such as José Brambila Jr.

Like most aspects of a hyphenate identity, however, national team fandom is a complex thing. “Out of 10 personal [Mexican-American] friends, I’d say four are die-hard U.S. fans and the others are Mexico fans,” says José Jr. “When the U.S. isn’t playing Mexico, they support the U.S. because they were born here. But when Mexico plays the U.S., they feel like they’re betraying their heritage if they cheer for the U.S.”

Nobody is more aware of the gigantic stateside following for Mexican soccer (and the growing stature of the U.S. team among Spanish-speaking Americans) than Juan Carlos Rodríguez, president of Univision Deportes, which will air the U.S.-Mexico game in Spanish. Rodríguez notes, “[The Mexican league] is by far the most-watched soccer

league in the U.S. And the Mexican national team is the most-watched soccer team in America, regardless of language. It is the jewel of the crown.

“But the U.S. is everyone’s team now too,” Rodríguez adds. “For second- and third-generation Mexicans, it has become their No. 2 team at the very least. So you have a first-generation Mexican cheering for Mexico. And you have a

second-generation Mexican struggling over whom to cheer for. There are going to be nearly 100,000 people [at the Rose Bowl on Saturday] and millions watching [on TV] cheering for both teams with a very nonpolitical mindset.” In other words: removing barriers, dissolving walls.

That’s not meant to be naive, of course. A soccer game won’t erase the immigration

debate, and one of the world’s great rivalries will no doubt produce flash points on the field and in the stands. “There are so many issues extraneous to the game,” says Rodolfo de la Garza, a Columbia professor who specializes in immigration issues, citing Trump, the ongoing drug war and decades of contentious U.S.-Mexican relations. “The U.S. has been Mexico’s one real [non-soccer] enemy in its history. So the Mexicans have an added incentive: Beat the historical enemy, beat the insulting



**This game can
help remove
barriers
between the
countries.**

enemy and beat a good team.”

Yet even then you can argue that soccer itself is helping to tear down walls. Until the 1990s this rivalry was so one-sided in Mexico's favor that nobody cared much on either side of the Rio Grande. Most telling of the ensuing reversal: The U.S. has beaten Mexico by a 2-0 score so often in the last 15 years that U.S. Soccer applied to trademark the phrase *dos a cero*.

New chapters only add to the rivalry's rich history. Mexico's 4-2 victory in the 2011 Gold Cup final resulted in the firing of U.S. coach Bob Bradley. Two years later Mexico was seconds away from the indignity of being knocked out of World Cup 2014 *during the regional qualifying tournament*. Survival depended on charity from the U.S., which had already qualified, and there was Graham Zusi (*San Zusi* now south of the border) delivering a last-minute goal to knock out Panama and save Mexico's chorizo. “God Bless America!” screamed the TV Azteca commentator.

These days it's a major North American sporting event whenever the U.S. and El Tri take the field, and their countries fight to recruit dual-citizen players the way SEC schools might grapple over a prized tailback. This week's U.S. squad includes three members who could have chosen to play for Mexico (goalie Nick Rimando and defenders Ventura Alvarado and Michael Orozco); Mexico's has one (goalie Moisés Muñoz) who could have worn the Stars and Stripes. The winner of this meeting gets a trophy and the Confed Cup berth—but



NO LOVE LOST

In 64 hard-fought matches, Mexico leads 32-18-14, but over the last six the U.S. has gone 3-0-3.

there may be more at stake. In the 15 months since the U.S. reached the World Cup Round of 16, coach Jurgen Klinsmann's crew has fallen into a funk, underscored by a fourth-place finish in the 2014 Gold Cup.

Is Klinsmann's job in jeopardy? His boss, U.S. Soccer president Sunil Gulati, says Klinsmann will be safe even if the U.S. loses on Saturday. But if that happens, you can be certain that for the first time during the coach's four-year

tenure there will be widespread calls in the U.S. media for the German with the \$3 million-plus annual salary to be axed.

If that sounds like the script for a telenovela, consider the drama on the other side. Mexico coach Miguel Herrera was fired just two days after his team won the Gold Cup in July. His offense: allegedly punching a Mexican media personality—the same TV commentator who cried “God Bless America!”

These latest plot twists have only increased the banter inside the Brambila household as the clock ticks down to Saturday's kickoff. But even then, all is not as simple as it seems. These days José Sr. coaches the youth soccer team of his 12-year-old daughter Isabel, who's a goalkeeper. “My dad wears a Mexico jersey, but he loves the U.S. *women's* national team,” says José Jr. “My sister is a huge Hope Solo fan, and her dream is to play for the U.S. So when it comes to women's soccer, he's a U.S. fan.”

José Jr. laughs. So does his father. National team relationship status: It's complicated. □

GO FIGURE

2/3



Innings pitched by Toronto's **Mark Buehrle** against the Rays in the regular-season finale. It was his shortest outing in 493 career starts, and he fell four outs shy of reaching 200 IP for a record 15th straight year.



350

Rolls of toilet paper brought by the Jets to London for their game against the Dolphins at Wembley Stadium on Sunday.

2

Consecutive weeks a college quarterback has led his team in passing, rushing and receiving—after a 12-year span in which it didn't happen. On Sept. 27, Tennessee's Josh Dobbs (83 passing, 136 rushing, 58 receiving) topped the Volunteers in those categories in a loss to Florida. Last Saturday, North Carolina's Marquise Williams (134, 148, 37) did the same in a win at Georgia Tech.

5th



The Reds' finish in the five-team NL Central, their first last-place finish since 1983. In that span every other team in the NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB had finished last at least once.

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Get Out!

LAST WEEK Northwestern announced that Charlie Hall, son of seven-time Emmy-winning actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus, had made the basketball team as a walk-on. The 6' 5" freshman will try to help the Wildcats make their first NCAA tournament, which is one of the few major sporting events his mom's most famous TV show didn't address during its nine-season run. In fact, for a show that was often said to be about nothing, *Seinfeld* rarely missed a chance to talk sports. Not that there's anything wrong with that.



SUPER BOWL: "The Label Maker" (original air date Jan. 19, 1995)

Jerry has tickets to Super Bowl XXIX, gives them to his dentist (played by a pre-*Breaking Bad* Bryan Cranston), then—yada, yada, yada—he gets them back and winds up sitting next to ... Newman. That's a fate worse than enduring the 49ers' 49-26 rout of the Chargers.



WORLD SERIES: "The Boyfriend" (Feb. 12, 1992); "The Millennium" (May 1, 1997)

In the former Jerry falls for 1986 Mets hero Keith Hernandez ("the guy was in Game 6!"); in the latter George, the Yankees' assistant to the traveling secretary, drags the Commissioner's Trophy through the parking lot in a failed attempt to get fired.



NHL PLAYOFFS: "The Face Painter" (May 11, 1995)

Elaine's boyfriend is David Puddy, a Devils diehard who paints his face for games. To assuage her concerns about this "insane" behavior, Puddy paints his chest instead before a 1995 playoff game against the Rangers. In real life, New Jersey won the Stanley Cup that year. High five.



U.S. OPEN: "The Lip Reader" (Oct. 28, 1993)

In an unfortunate bit of scriptwriting, Monica Seles is accidentally tackled by Kramer (a ballboy, natch) during the 1993 U.S. Open final. The real Seles, who won the event in 1991 and '92, missed it in '93 after being stabbed by a fan during a changeover at a match in Germany that April.



NEW YORK CITY MARATHON: "The Hot Tub" (Oct. 19, 1995)

Jerry scrambles to get Jean-Paul, a top distance runner, to the start of the marathon on time. Jean-Paul is leading the race near the finish line when he grabs Kramer's hot tea, thinking it's water, and douses himself with it, costing himself the race. That's a shame.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

A priest in New Jersey was arrested for pointing a musket at an eight-year-old and threatening to shoot because the kid was a Cowboys fan.

Ichiro

He tossed an inning of two-hit ball against the Phils. Smart move: At 41 he should be looking for a second career.



HOT
NOT



Texas

After a 50-7 drubbing by TCU, it looks like the Longhorns are headed for a Red River beatdown.

THEY SAID IT



"JORDAN, I'M A BIG NASCAR FAN, AND I'M GLAD TO BE HERE."

Anonymous

Man who sat at the podium after Regan Smith's Xfinity Series win at Dover last Saturday and answered several questions from the media as if he were Smith's crew chief, when finally asked who he was.

ALL-NEW

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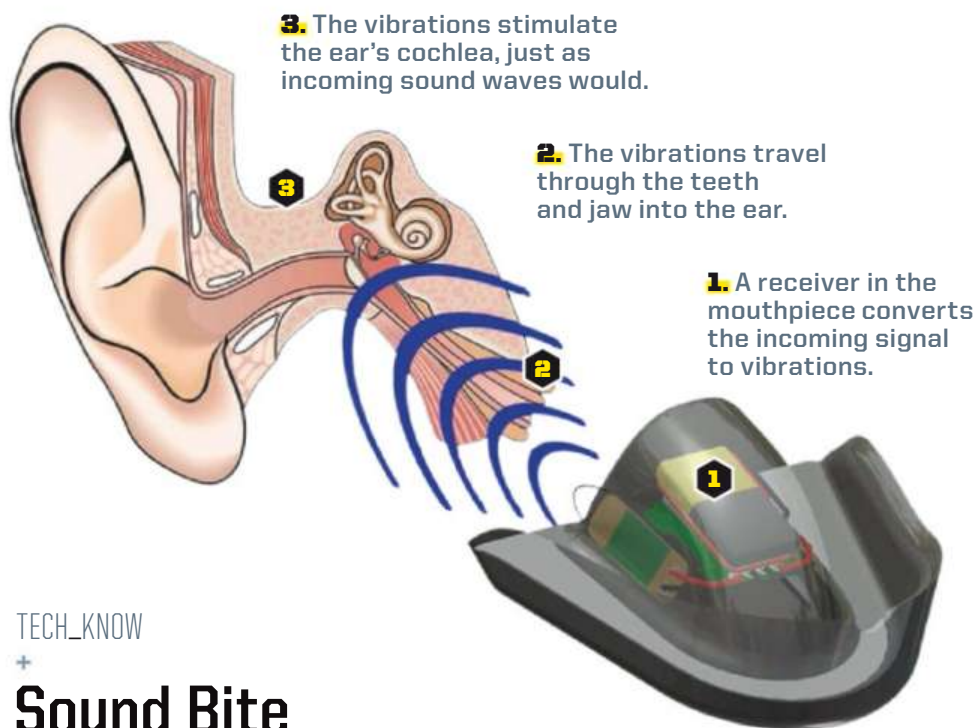
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Sound Bite

The future of on-field communication may sound like the little voice inside your head

NFL TEAMS already use high-end noise-canceling headphones on the sidelines but the receivers inside players' helmets have to fight ambient noise. In the future there may be a way for coaches to send signals that not even the loudest crowd could drown out. In the next few weeks the Cowboys and a Dallas-based startup called MindTalk will begin testing prototypes of a mouth guard fitted with a small receiver during practice. The signal from the sideline is converted into vibrations by the mouth guard. Those vibrations travel through the player's teeth to his jaw bone then to his inner ear,

where they stimulate the cochlea just as incoming sound waves would. "You don't actually hear it," explains Nick Fragnito, one of MindTalk's founders. "It almost feels like the voice inside your head."

Fragnito, 25, and cofounder Rob Burke, 24, got their idea from their days playing football and from a musical trinket of their youth. In 1998, Hasbro made a lollipop holder called Sound Bites that used bone conduction to let kids listen to music while they sucked on a treat. MindTalk repackaged that technology and now hopes to use it for more than child's play.

"[The mouth guard] is a form that hasn't been

done before," Burke says. "Basically it accommodates communication in extreme environments." It's also a cool way for someone who's sparring or skating laps to listen to music. Besides the Cowboys, the company is working with the Dallas Stars, and the founders also see uses for first responders and construction workers. The product should hit shelves next August primarily as a music player with other applications to follow, though it won't appear on NFL sidelines any time soon. (The league has a deal with Bose.)

Elsewhere, though, coaches who want to get in a player's head will have a direct line. —Tom Taylor

+ Brain Changer

■ **How can** you get some of the benefits of PEDs without using drugs? Thync. Strap this triangular device above your eyebrow, and it pulses small electrical currents, no more than about 20 milliamps, into the nerves on the head through a sticky strip of electrodes.

According to Jamie Tyler, Thync's CEO and cofounder, the currents modulate norepinephrine production in the brain, increasing it to boost alertness or decreasing it for greater calmness. The effects vary from person to person, but 80% of people experience a strong response, according to the company.

Is it legal? Thync is neither a drug nor a medical device that would require FDA approval, but it can produce effects similar to banned doping agents. "If you get to the point where you can start to shave seconds off [your] time," Tyler says, "then there might be cause for concern. But we're not there yet." —T.T.



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REVIEW

Jesus Is My Quarterback

■ TONY NATHAN

would go on to a storied college and NFL career, but in 1973 he was just a high school running back battling racial tension in segregation-scarred Birmingham. In *Woodlawn*, Nathan calls on his faith and talent to bravely integrate the Woodlawn High program after an evangelist unites the team in a literal come-to-Jesus moment. Former Bama DB Caleb Castille provides authenticity as Nathan and a starry supporting cast (Jon Voight as Bear Bryant, Sean Astin—aka Rudy—as the evangelist) gives the film a glossy feel. Some might be turned off by the overtly religious message within, while others might be thrilled that the son of God is practically a credited actor in the film. Regardless of religious conviction, *Woodlawn* shares a universal truth: Winning is sweeter when you play for a larger cause. —A.F.



Fiona O'Keeffe | *Davis, Calif.* | *Cross-country*

Fiona, a senior at Davis Senior High, won the 5K Stanford Invitational in 16:32.10, the top time in the nation this season. A week earlier she took the three-mile De La Salle Invitational in a course-record 16:41.00. The two-time defending CIF Division 1 champion, Fiona was fourth in last year's Nike Cross Nationals.



Grant House | *Maineville, Ohio* | *Swimming*

Grant, a junior at St. Xavier High, anchored the U.S.'s gold medal win at world juniors in Singapore with a 1:49.29 leg in the 800-meter freestyle relay; the team set a junior world record by 1.6 seconds [7:13.76]. A six-time state champ, he led the AquaBombers to a seventh Ohio Division I title and the NISCA national championship last season.



Carnae Dillard | *San Antonio* | *Volleyball*

Dillard, a 5' 8" senior outside hitter at North Texas, was named MVP of the Tulsa Invitational after leading the Mean Green with 20 kills, 10 digs and a season-high .487 hitting percentage in a 3-0 sweep of Tulsa. The 2014 Conference USA player of the year, she was leading D-I with 5.34 kills per set and 390 total kills at week's end.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK



Tharzan Laureore | *Boston* | *Football*

Tharzan, a senior running back, defensive back and kicker filling in at quarterback for Cathedral High, ran for three touchdowns, passed for another and returned an interception for a TD in a 36-26 come-from-behind win over Pope John Paul II High of Hyannis. He had nine rushing touchdowns and three pick-sixes last season.



Kim Wyant | *East Meadow, N.Y.* | *Soccer*

Wyant, 51, guided Division III NYU to a 1-0 victory over the City College of New York, her first win as the only woman serving as head coach of an NCAA men's soccer team. The MVP of the first women's NCAA championship as a player for Central Florida in 1982, she was the goalkeeper on the first U.S. women's national team and had 16 caps.



Trent Theroux | *Riverside, R.I.* | *Open-water Swimming*

Theroux, 47, a finance director and adjunct professor at Johnson & Wales, completed the first solo swim around Aquidneck Island in Narragansett Bay, a 41.5-mile journey, in 16:20. Temporarily paralyzed in 2002 when a boat propeller sliced his back muscles and spine, he raised \$40,548 for the National Spinal Cord Injury Association with his swim.

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JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: *What do you get for winning Tour Player of the Year?*

JORDAN SPIETH: It goes on your Wikipedia [page], and you get a nice trophy.

DP: *Will you have to add on to your house to hold all the trophies?*

JS: The Masters and U.S. Open (*right*) ones are in my closet right now. They're next to the [Masters] jacket. I don't want them out. I want to hold on to them in my room.

DP: *What do you have to focus on to sustain this kind of success?*

JS: Being healthy. My swing, although not technically perfect, I know it's not going to get me hurt. As long as I'm not doing anything to harm my body and don't do anything dumb off the course, I don't see why my career couldn't last for quite a while.

DP: *When's the last time you did something dumb off the golf course?*

JS: That's a vague term. I love playing other sports, and you could get hurt pretty easily doing that. You've got to be careful when you do things like play basketball. However, I don't want to stop doing what I love, and I love to play sports.

DP: *Is basketball your second-best sport?*

JS: Baseball was. But I'd



JORDAN SPIETH

HARDWARE MAN

At 22, the youngest Player of the Year since Tiger Woods in 1997 plans to use a little caution and a lot of common sense to keep collecting trophies.

swing under the ball every time. I like basketball.

My brother [Steven] plays in college [at Brown].

DP: *Can you dunk?*

JS: Gosh, no. I can grab the rim. That'd be a good goal for off-season training though.

DP: *Which is tougher, hitting a baseball or a golf ball?*

JS: Depends on who's pitching. Probably a baseball. It's moving, it's spinning, it's dropping. At least for me, hitting a baseball is harder.

DP: *Did your parents ever try to slow down your competitiveness?*

JS: I don't think they tried to slow it down, but certainly to control it so I wouldn't overdo it or be annoying and unprofessional. That's just part of maturing. I had plenty of conversations with my dad after I didn't behave in the right way. He said you just shouldn't act that way. Growing up, if you don't like to lose, you're going to express it in different ways. You have to learn the right way to get over it and move on.

DP: *What do you think of microphones on the course listening to what you say to your caddie?*

JS: I like it. I'm glad they don't pick up on everything you say walking between shots, but it'd be really interesting for players to be miked up for an entire round. Wouldn't you want to hear what Tiger is saying throughout an entire round? Good, bad or whatever? □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Sen.

John McCain

criticized the NFL for charging the military for in-game promotions. "They should be embarrassed," McCain told me. "They hold these events to honor the men and women who are serving, and they're charging the Department of Defense? Do they know no shame?" ... Bengals WR **A.J. Green**



told me that when he needs a break from

football, he watches Animal Planet. "I love [the show] *Treehouse Masters*," Green said. "I want a tree house. Right now I don't have any trees. I need to plant some so in the next couple years I can put one in." ... Former NFL



defensive end **Michael Sam**

explained why his stint with the CFL's Montreal Alouettes didn't work out. "I wasn't getting better as a football player," Sam told me. "It was a defense I wasn't used to in Montreal, and I thought I was losing all the stuff I had learned in the NFL."

FOLD PAGE →



SO **B** MEETS **A**

A

B

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THIS YELLING IS
MAKING ME ANXIOUS.
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The Case for . . .

Magical Max

BY CLIFF CORCORAN



IN WHAT will be remembered as a disastrous season for the Nationals, a popular preseason World Series pick that was eliminated from contention with more than a week remaining, there was at least one thing that went right for Washington in 2015: its off-season signing of righty free-agent Max Scherzer. While he went just 14–12 in the first year of his seven-year, \$210 million contract, Scherzer set career bests for ERA (2.79) and strikeouts (276) while tying for the National League lead in starts (33) as well as the MLB lead in complete games (four) and shutouts (three). He also topped the league in another category: no-hitters.

With his no-no against the Mets at Citi Field last Saturday, a 2–0 victory, Scherzer became just the sixth man to throw two no-hitters in the same season. This one was even more remarkable than his June 20 gem against the Pirates, which would have been a perfect game if not for a controversial hit by pitch of Jose Tabata with two outs and two strikes in the ninth inning.

In fact, this was one of the most dominant performances in major league history. Scherzer struck out 17, with the only base runner reaching on a throwing error by third baseman Yunel

Escobar in the sixth inning. Scherzer's Game Score (a Bill James stat that credits and debits each part of a pitcher's line score to arrive at a single number) was 104, the second highest ever in a nine-inning game, behind only Kerry Wood's 20-strikeout one-hitter for the Cubs in May 1998.

Before Saturday, Scherzer's best start of this season may not have even been his first no-hitter. On June 14, the outing before he blanked Pittsburgh, he struck out 16 Brewers while allowing just one hit and one walk for a Game Score of 100. His Game Score in his first no-hitter was 97. Nine times this season a pitcher had a

Game Score of 97 or better. Scherzer had *three* of those.

The only other pitchers with that many Game Scores of 97 or better in a single season? Walter Johnson (1918) and Nolan Ryan (1990). Both, however, needed extra innings to reach those scores. Scherzer is also the first pitcher on record to compile multiple Game Scores of 100 or better in nine-inning games in a single season. Furthermore, since 1914 (as far back as play-by-play data goes) Scherzer is the first man to pitch two games in the same season in which he allowed neither a hit nor a walk.

Perhaps most amazing, Scherzer took a no-hitter into the sixth inning six times this year, including against the Reds in his penultimate start. (It was broken up with one out in the eighth.) And while Milwaukee and Cincinnati were dreadful this season, the Pirates and the Mets are playoff teams; despite resting five of its eight regulars on Saturday, New York sent starters Yoenis Cespedes and Lucas Duda to the plate in the ninth inning as pinch hitters. Those two, plus Curtis Granderson, meant Scherzer would have to go through the Mets' three best hitters of the season, as measured by Offensive Wins Above Replacement, to complete his brilliant outing. He struck out the first two—giving him nine straight K's—and then got Granderson to pop out.

No-hitters were not rare in 2015, either around the majors—there were seven, tying the MLB record—or at Citi Field, where the Giants' Chris Heston threw one on June 9. Still, Scherzer's performance topped them all, and it will be remembered long after the rest of Washington's season is forgotten. □

6

Pitchers who have thrown two no-hitters in a season

104

Scherzer's Game Score against the Mets, the second highest ever in a nine-inning game

9

Consecutive strikeouts from the sixth to the ninth innings, one shy of the MLB record

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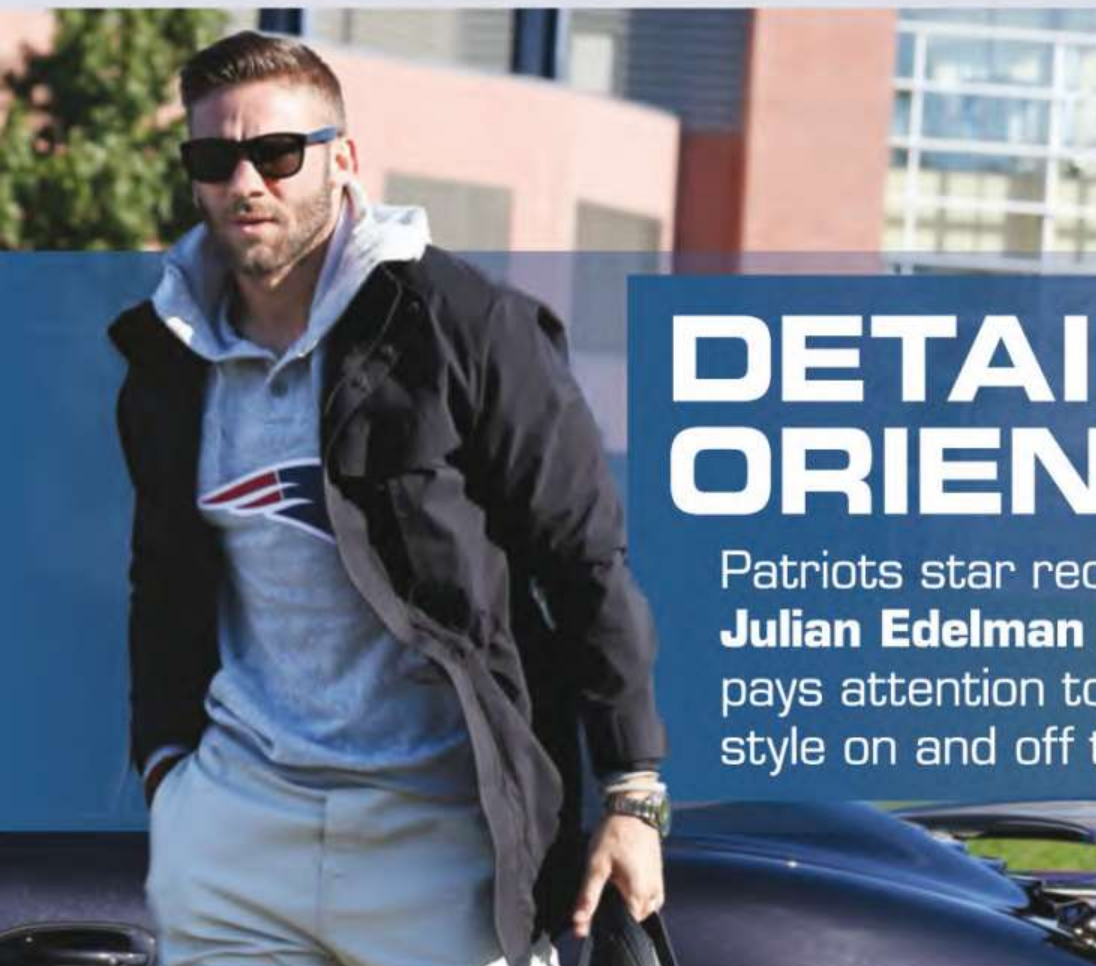


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DETAIL ORIENTED

Patriots star receiver
Julian Edelman
pays attention to his
style on and off the field.

GROWING UP IN the Bay Area, Julian Edelman made sure to let his style shine through. The New England Patriots wide receiver was fashion-forward from an early age and always stayed ahead of the trends.

"I'm a little embarrassed to say," he admits with a laugh. "We always sported our little socks up to our calves. Maybe a 'jort.' We had puka shells when we were real young, or were showing a hint of having a gold chain on—the little details were the things that I dug."

Now in his seventh season in the NFL, Edelman has a distinctive style of play and was a critical player in the Patriots' victory in Super Bowl XLIX last season. He considers himself a "creature of habit," and his pregame routine rarely strays: He studies his playbook at the same time of day, sits in the hot tub to loosen up and wears a similar outfit to every home game.

"It's a lot of studying, a lot of music listening, the same routine every week," he explains. "I like to wear darker colors for home games. I keep it fresh with a cool sweater and dark jeans, maybe a coat or beanie."

Like any longtime resident of New England, Edelman is frequently spotted shopping on Newbury Street in Boston while sporting Patriots apparel.

"I'm a huge fan of the old 'Pat the Patriot' logo," Edelman says. "I get those retro t-shirts and rock that with a pair of jeans and a fresh pair of sneakers, and it's gonna

work. Or I can throw a cool jacket over it, depending on what the event is. You can definitely use those old-school retro shirts a lot of ways."

Edelman is by far one of the most fashionable players in the league but strives for a simple, timeless look. "I try to keep it semi-ageless," he says, "where you can wear it in any decade. I rock the high-end stuff and dress it down with sneakers, or a specially cut shirt, to really make things pop."

If he dresses up, Edelman models his look after a true fashion icon. "When you see James Bond, he always looks fresh, cool, stylish, classy," Edelman says. "But he was always in the 'new' cool, the 'new' flashy. I go that route."

For his photo shoot for NFL Apparel, Edelman had input on everything he wore in order to create outfits authentic to his daily look. As with everything, the details are what count.

"My suits have to be cut right," he says. "I like my pants a little tapered at the bottom. There has to be room in the shoulders. It's more of that young, fresh look." Edelman likes to "flair it up" with bracelets, a cool watch and no tie, but if the event is more formal, he lets his personality shine through in the details. "I'll throw a cool knit tie on or try to change up my pocket square," he says. "Not too funky, but I get a little poppage with that." With tons of Cali style, Edelman is a fashion king of New England. —Evan Scott Schwartz



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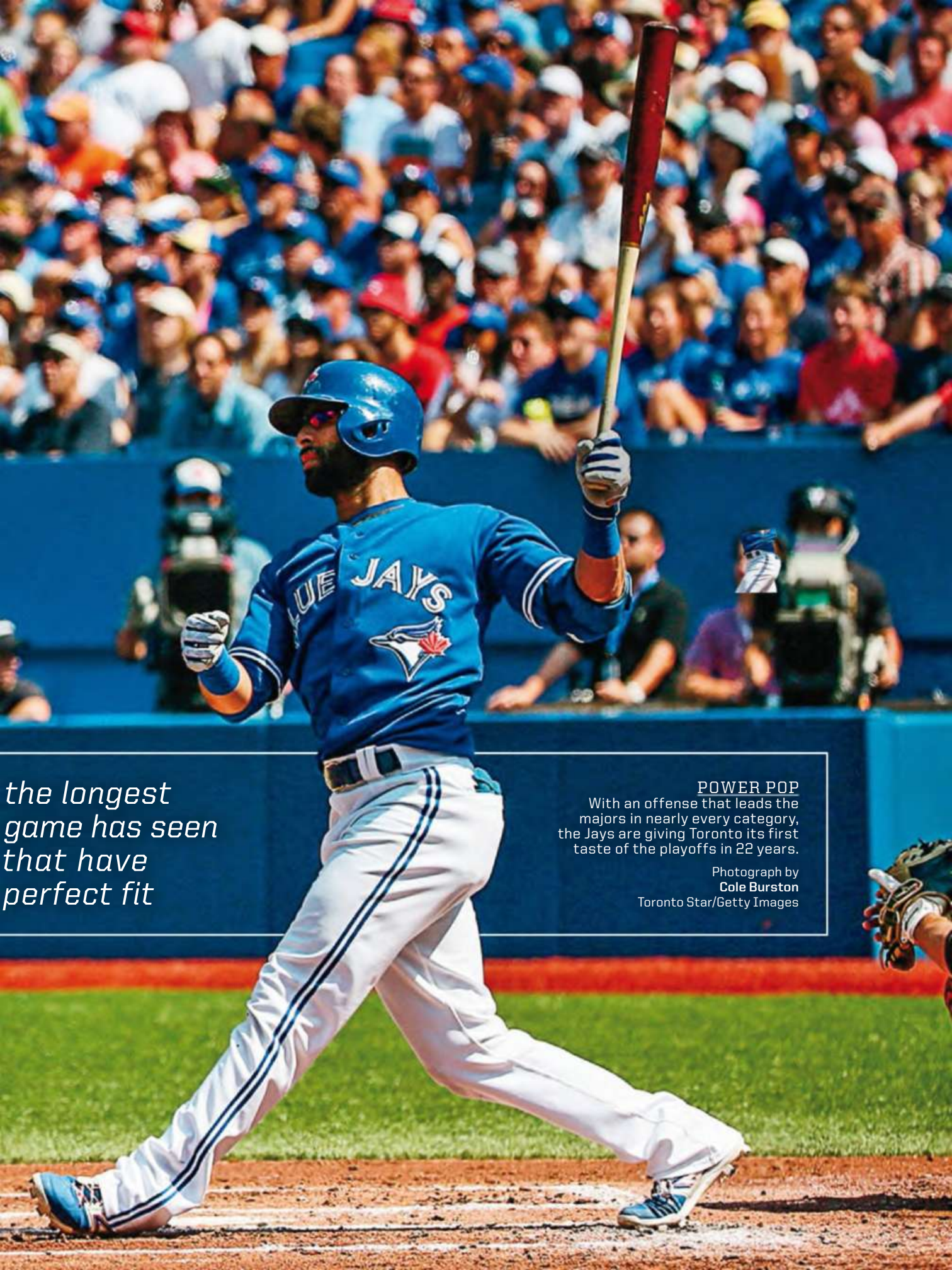


MLB PLAYOFF PREVIEW

WORTH THE WAIT

BY TOM
VERDUCCI

*The **BLUE JAYS** are the ultimate October outliers, ending postseason drought in pro sports with the best offense the in a decade. But in a field full of franchises and managers paid heavy dues in search of a title, Toronto's skipper is a*

A full-page photograph of a Toronto Blue Jays player in mid-swing. The player is wearing a blue jersey with "BLUE JAYS" and the team logo, white pants with blue stripes, and a blue helmet. He is holding a wooden bat. The background is a large, blurred crowd of spectators in a stadium.

*the longest
game has seen
that have
perfect fit*

POWER POP

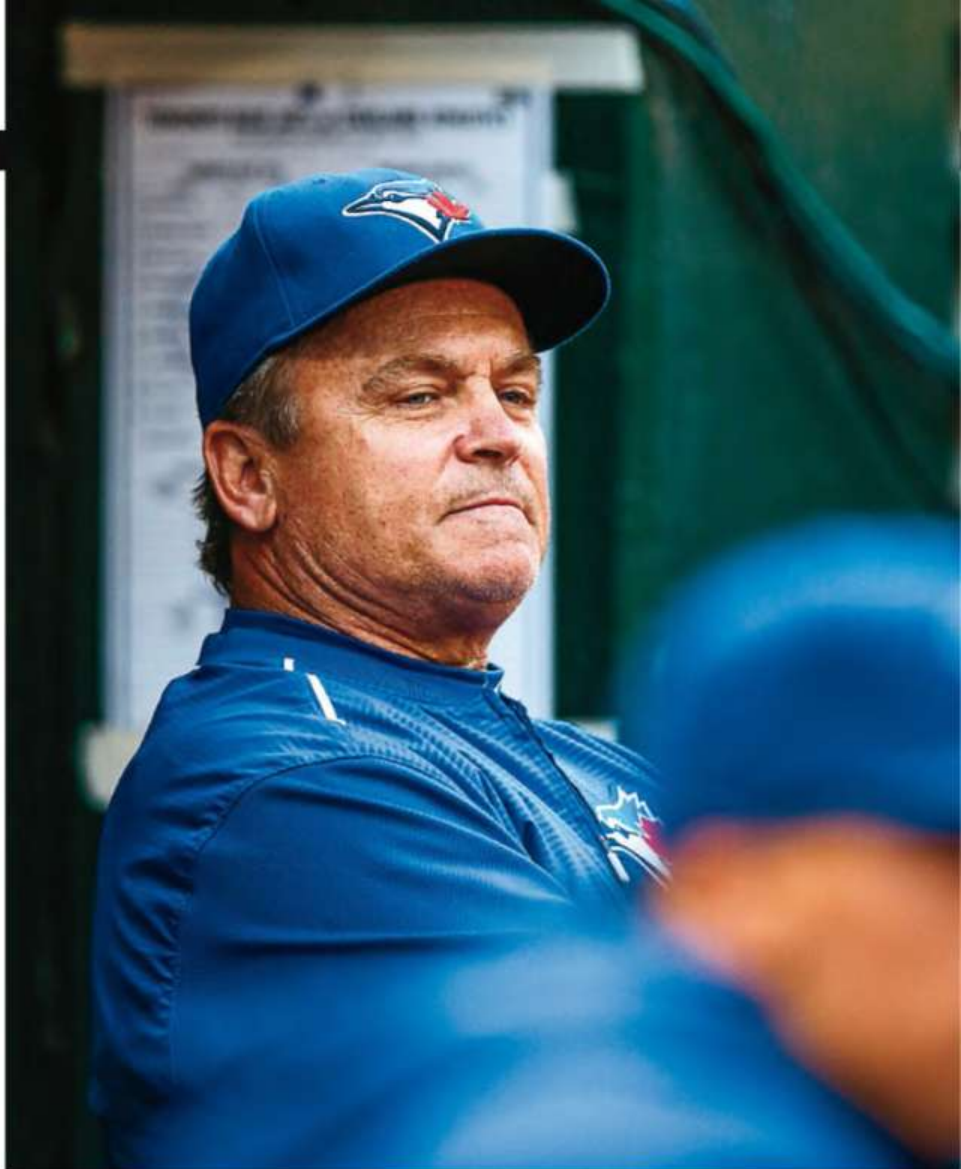
With an offense that leads the majors in nearly every category, the Jays are giving Toronto its first taste of the playoffs in 22 years.

Photograph by
Cole Burston
Toronto Star/Getty Images



UNTIL HIS team clinched the American League East last week, what stood between Blue Jays manager John Gibbons and postseason play were 35 years of pro ball, thousands of miles of asphalt beneath the wheels of minor league buses, and a horse's rear end.

Welcome to a postseason featuring some of the heaviest dues-payers in baseball. The oldest manager in baseball, Terry Collins, 66, of the Mets, will manage his first postseason game. He will be matched against Dodgers manager Don Mattingly, who has invested



If you need a proxy for the elusiveness of titles—or even of just getting to the postseason—Gibbons is your man.

29 years in uniform as a player, coach and manager without getting to the World Series. And the field is so chock full of championship-drought-stricken teams that the generational wait for Gibbons's Jays (22 years) trails those of *seven* others in the 10-team field: the Dodgers (27), Mets (29), Pirates (36), Royals (30), Astros (54), Rangers (55) and the great-great-granddaddy of the unfulfilled, the Cubs (107).

If you need a proxy for the elusiveness of titles—or even of just getting to the postseason—Gibbons, 53, is your man. He wound up not only with one of the hottest teams down the stretch (40–16 since Aug. 1) and the highest-scoring team, but also the most dominant team in 15 years as measured by run differential (+221). But to capture what it took Gibbons to get to his first true October, there are nearly as many stories as bus



rides, including his early minor league housing arrangement (four men and one bed), the pet raccoon of Billy Beane, a roommate nicknamed Lucifer, the two times as major league manager he challenged one of his players to a fight and the time he gladly went back to manage Double A baseball *after* managing in the big leagues.

“The night we clinched, I celebrated for about 10 minutes and came back

X-FACTOR

DRY SPELLS

Much like Jays fans (below left), Gibbons (left) endured a long postseason drought, one that included years of minor league bus rides between MLB stints.

here,” Gibbons said last week, sitting in the visiting manager’s office at Oriole Park. “I felt relief. I thought about how it’s been so long for me to get here.

“I’ve really been fortunate just to have the opportunity to coach or manage in the big leagues. But I never wanted to look back and just say I was glad to get a chance to coach or manage. I wanted to say that I *won* something in the big leagues. And I think there’s more ahead than just the AL East.”

ACTUALLY, THIS will be Gibbons’s second trip to the postseason, but owing to the peripatetic and odd nature of his career, it is his first official appearance and the first, presumably, without the back end of a horse in his way.

Gibbons was one of three first-round picks by the Mets in the 1980 draft; the others were future star Darryl Strawberry and Beane, the future general manager of the Athletics. Four years later, at age 22, Gibbons was on the verge of winning the starting catcher job in spring training, only to lose it in the last week of camp when a runner threw an elbow at him, breaking his cheekbone. Gibbons returned to the job in April, only to lose it again with a 1-for-25 slump that ended with a torn ligament in his elbow.

Gibbons resurfaced briefly with the Mets in 1986 as an August call-up from the minors, but New York did not have a spot for him as a third catcher on its postseason roster. The Mets kept him around that fall as a bullpen catcher, which is how Gibbons came to be warming up Dwight Gooden in the pen as Mookie Wilson came to the plate against Boston pitcher Bob Stanley with the Red Sox leading by a run in the

DEREK HOLLAND



Jon Daniels’s July trades for ace Cole Hamels and relievers Jake Diekmann and Sam Dyson were critical in the Rangers’ surprising push to the AL West title. Texas, which allowed 4.8 runs per game through the end of July (and went 50-52), cut that in the season’s final two months by more than half a run, to 4.1 (and went 38-22). But the trades alone didn’t bolster the staff.

The team got starter Derek Holland back on Aug. 19, and while he was erratic (a 4.91 ERA and 11 home runs allowed in 10 starts), he came up big against the Angels on Sept. 5 (eight innings, one run) and in the postseason clincher last Thursday (6¹/₃ innings, three runs). Those starts were a reminder that Holland, 28, was on his way to stardom before a series of injuries—a torn left meniscus, a strained left shoulder—ruined his 2014 and ’15 seasons. He threw four shutouts in ’11 and was a World Series hero for the Rangers that October, hanging 8¹/₃ scoreless innings on the Cardinals in Game 4. For a team whose rotation was a weak spot until August, Holland is a critical player behind Hamels, rising above the designation of “innings guy” even though he made just four quality starts this season. Matching up with the Jays, the best-hitting team in baseball against

lefties, creates an enormous challenge for him. Holland will have to lean heavily on his curve, which produced a 31% swing-and-miss rate against righthanded batters this season; the curve is the rare pitch against which the Jays didn’t post league-leading numbers.

—Joe Sheehan



X-FACTOR

ALCIDES ESCOBAR

Ned Yost's handling of his players as *people* has never been in question. It's his handling of them as chess pieces—assigning playing time, handling relievers, strategizing, setting lineups—that once created Internet memes like “#yosted” to describe his most frustrating moves. Dating to

September 2014, though, Yost had been savvier, improving his reliever usage last postseason and his lineups in 2015... until recently. With a week left in the season Yost went away from his statistically optimal lineup, with Alex Gordon and Ben Zobrist in the top two slots, to his favored one, with Alcides Escobar leading off (and Gordon dropped as low as seventh and eighth) to counteract the team's slump. If Yost sticks with this order, it puts pressure on Escobar to do the one thing not in his skill set: Get on base. The 28-year-old shortstop had a .293 OBP this year, which pulled his career mark below .300. He rarely walks (26 in 662 plate appearances this year), and his career average is .262. Among the nine projected Kansas City starters, he's seventh in OBP. Not to mention these aren't last year's Royals: They enter the playoffs with a shaky rotation and a bullpen missing closer Greg Holland (UCL tear in his right arm). The offense will need to step up, which means Escobar will have to be on base for Eric Hosmer and Kendrys Morales. Just as he was a year ago, the glove-first infielder is now pivotal in the K.C. offense. Last year, Escobar scored just eight runs in 15 postseason games at the top of the order, though the Royals won 11 of 15 games in spite of that performance. A better leadoff man would go a long way toward repeating—or extending—that success. —J.S.



10th inning of World Series Game 6.

“So I’m catching Doc, in case the game is tied,” Gibbons says. “And the mounted police are lined up on their big old horses right there in the bullpen, looking out on the field. They’re getting ready to keep people off the field if Boston wins.

“Well, every time Doc hits my mitt—and you know how hard he could throw; *pow!*—the horses would jump. They were right by me, no more than from here to that wall [about 10 feet away]. I’ve got one eye on Doc and one eye on the horses. They kept jumping every time he hit my mitt. It was a little scary. But you know what? It was a thrill to be a part of that.”

The Mets rallied to win Game 6 and then Game 7, of course, and Gibbons was awarded a world championship ring. He had appeared in eight games in 1986, the last of an 18-game major league career in which he hit .220. His participation in this postseason will be far more significant. His Blue Jays feature a throwback offense, the likes of which we haven’t seen since baseball instituted testing for PEDs in 2004. Thanks to the thunder of Josh Donaldson, Jose Bautista and Edwin Encarnacion, Toronto joined the 1996 and ’97 Rockies and the ’73 Braves as the only teams with three players to hit at least 39 home runs.

“They’re clearly the team to beat in the American League,” says Mets special assistant and former Toronto GM J.P. Ricciardi. “They have the best offense in the playoffs, hands down. But I’ve been there before. When I was in Oakland, we were in the same position in 1988, ’89 and ’90, and look what happened twice: Great pitching stops great hitting. I don’t see anybody beating them in the AL unless you have someone like [Texas lefthander Cole] Hamels pitching two or three times against them, the way [Orel] Hershisser stopped us in ’88.”

Says Gibbons, “There’s no question we go up there looking to hit home runs, so sometimes a softer-throwing

X-FACTOR

COREY SEAGER



One of the questions surrounding the Dodgers has been whether manager Don Mattingly would shake his preference—learned at the feet of late-period Joe Torre—for veterans, and put his best players on the field. For most of the season Jimmy Rollins was the starting shortstop and by far L.A.'s worst regular, hitting just .224/.285/.358, getting caught on 8

of 20 stolen base attempts and showing the defensive range you would expect from a 36-year-old. When Rollins suffered a righthand injury on Sept. 6 against the Padres, it created an opportunity for top prospect Corey Seager, 21, and the lefthanded-hitting rookie seized it. Seager has put up a .337/.425/.561 line since his call-up, reaching base in all but one of his 25 starts. Rollins's hand has healed, but he hasn't reclaimed his starting spot; Mattingly has put him in the lineup just five times since his injury. The massive offensive gap between the players dwarfs whatever fielding edge the sure-handed Rollins may have on Seager, who gets to more balls but also makes more mistakes. Because the Dodgers' high-strikeout rotation doesn't especially depend on defense—their starters had the lowest contact rate (76.9%) and second highest swinging strike rate (10.8%) in the majors this season—Mattingly can choose the superior hitter. His best lineup includes Seager at shortstop, especially against the Mets' righthanded power arms. —J.S.

lefty who turns the ball over can give us trouble. The kid from Philadelphia [Adam Morgan] beat us twice doing that." Lefthanded starters were 12–13 (.480) against Toronto this year while righthanders went 33–58 (.363).

If recent postseason form holds, however, the path to a championship is paved more by late-inning relief pitchers—and how a manager deploys his bullpen pieces. Bruce Bochy of San Francisco, whose relievers combined for a 13–2 record in the championship runs of 2010, '12 and '14, Tony La Russa of St. Louis, who made a postseason-record 75 pitching changes in '11, and John Farrell of Boston, whose relievers posted a 1.28 postseason ERA in '13, secured the past five World Series titles with deft bullpen usage.

Not only is Gibbons new to the strategic urgency of postseason baseball, but also the relievers he used most often in the eighth and ninth innings this year are rookies: Aaron Sanchez, 23, and Roberto Osuna, 20, respectively. "He'll be fine," Ricciardi says of Gibbons. "He's been managing a long time. He has a set lineup, so he doesn't have to pinch-hit much. And I don't think anyone runs a bullpen better than Gibby. He knows when to get guys up and who to match up against. There's never been a time where he didn't have the right guy ready or wasn't prepared for a spot. He doesn't get flustered and he doesn't panic."

Ricciardi has known Gibbons since they roomed together with the Class A Shelby (N.C.) Mets in 1981, the year after Ricciardi signed with the organization as an undrafted free-agent infielder. "Or as we called it, *Hell-be*," Gibbons says.

Gibbons and Ricciardi shared a small house with another player, Mike Hennessey, and a team official, John Alexander (then John Arezzi), a music aficionado who, to his roommates' amusement, often would boast that he found the next great singer at some backwoods North Carolina watering hole—until one day that year it actually happened: He discovered the singer Patty Loveless,



BACK IN THE DAY

As a player Gibbons (right, with catcher Russell Martin) appeared in just 18 major league games, including eight for the Mets in the 1986 championship season.

quit the Mets and moved to Nashville to become a successful entertainment manager. The house they shared that summer had only one bed, so the four of them stuck to a nightly rotation: “Bed, couch, floor, floor,” Gibbons says.

The next year at Shelby, Gibbons roomed with budding Mets prospects and bon vivants Lenny Dykstra and Roger McDowell. Earlier this year when a note came across the desk of Gibbons from someone looking for tickets, with only the name *Lucifer* attached to it, Gibbons smiled and knew who it was from: Dykstra.

Gibbons and Beane played together at Double A Jackson in 1982 and '83 and became fast friends. “One thing people don’t know about Billy is that he always wanted a raccoon as a pet,” Gibbons says. “I have no idea why. So one day in instructional league in Florida, we drove out to some Godforsaken place in a rural area and Billy buys this raccoon and brings it back with him in a cage. It must have been only four days later when he said, ‘This is not going to work.’ And that was the end of having a pet raccoon. Not one of his better ideas.”

GIBBONS WOULD play 962 minor league games over 11 years, including one season, 1988, in the Dodgers organization playing at Triple A Albuquerque for Collins. “He stood out,” Collins says, “because he ran every ball out and because of how hard he played.”

Says Gibbons, “I can’t say I’ve ever been around a more dedicated, diligent guy than Terry. I loved him.”

Gibbons’s modest playing career ended when he accepted an offer from the Mets in 1991 to be a minor league catching instructor. After 11 years coach-



ing and managing in the New York farm system, and fed up with being passed over for openings on the major league staff, Gibbons quit after managing the 2001 season at Triple A Norfolk. He figured he could always land a job working for his old friend Beane in the Oakland system—except Beane had no openings. “That’s how smart I am,” Gibbons says. “I walked out of a job with three kids and a wife, and I had just bought a house.”

Just then, however, another old friend, Ricciardi, was hired as general manager

of the Blue Jays. Ricciardi had no openings, either, although he told Gibbons he could get him a job as a bullpen catcher, a clear demotion for someone who had just been a Triple A manager.

“I thought, What the heck. I’ve been a bullpen catcher my whole life, basically,” Gibbons says. “So I go to spring training. I haven’t squatted in 10 years. The first day catching bullpens my knee just blows up. Now I’m the only bullpen catcher in baseball who can’t catch.”

“We didn’t have a very good team that year. The starters were getting knocked out early all the time. The bullpen was very busy. My knee got worse. By June, I said, ‘That’s it. I don’t think I can make it through the season.’ And right about then, J.P. made a [managerial] change. He replaced Buck Martinez with Carlos Tosca, one of the coaches. And he moved me to first base coach.”

Two years later Ricciardi hired Gibbons without warning to run the team. After a loss at Yankee Stadium one night in August 2004, he told Gibbons, “Don’t go anywhere,” walked into Tosca’s office and fired him, walked out and told Gib-

X-FACTOR

YOENIS CESPEDES



bons the job was his. Gibbons's tenure was punctuated by two 2006 incidents in which he confronted players he saw as insubordinate, Shea Hillenbrand and Ted Lilly. He lasted until '08, when Ricciardi fired his friend after a 35–39 start and a 305–305 overall record.

"The picture people had of Gibby from those two incidents couldn't be further from the truth of who he is," Ricciardi says. "When I fired him, my wife was crying, my kids were crying and Alex [Anthopoulos], my assistant GM, was crying. That's how much people think of Gibby. Meanwhile, Gibby is *thanking* me, and he's saying, 'I'm sorry I let you down.'"

Four years later, after a coaching stint with the Royals, Gibbons returned home to manage the Double A San Antonio Missions, a job that required bus rides as long as 12 hours. He turned 50 that summer. He was miles off the major league grid. "It didn't matter to me," Gibbons says. "It was the first time I was home in the summer in 30 years. I loved it. There's something to be said for waking up, cutting your own grass, going to the ballpark and coming back home to your own bed. If I never got another [major league] call, I was satisfied. I caught more breaks than a lot of guys."

One more break came after that 2012 season: His phone rang while he was lifting weights in his garage. It was Anthopoulos, who had replaced Ricciardi as the Jays' GM. He wanted Gibbons to fly to Toronto. He wanted to talk to him about the direction of the team. He might even have a job on the staff for him. After a day of chatting, Anthopoulos made Gibbons an offer he never saw coming for a second time in eight years: the Jays' managing job.

As he did in his first tenure, Gibbons steadily improved the club: Toronto climbed from 73 wins under Farrell in 2012 to 74 in '13 under Gibbons to 83 in '14 and, this year, to 93, the franchise's highest total since the 1993 championship team.

"The last couple of years we had a

You can trace the Mets' offensive arc through the swing of one man. Through four months of the season New York scored a miserable 3.5 runs per game. Yoenis Cespedes arrived from Detroit on Aug. 1 and the party began: a 41-game romp through the NL in which the Mets won 30 times, scoring more than six runs per game as Cespedes hit

.309/.356/.691 with 17 homers. There was briefly even talk of him as an MVP candidate. Unfortunately Cespedes went cold, scratching out a .218/.279/.327 line over the next three weeks without a single long ball. The Mets' lineup went with him, dipping to 3.6 runs per game during his slump. For all the talk of outfielder Michael Conforto (.270/.335/.506 since his call-up on July 24) and catcher Travis d'Arnaud (.256/.340/.464 since his July 31 return from an elbow sprain) and even the resurgence this season of outfielder Curtis Granderson (.259/.364/.457, his best work since 2011), New York's revival was about a Cuban outfielder on his fourth team in 13 months going nuts on a new league for six weeks. Cespedes's righthanded power will be critical in the Division Series, where the Mets will face three lefthanded Dodgers starters. That neutralizes Conforto (.214/.267/.214 against lefties) and Granderson (.183/.273/.286). The likelihood of low-scoring games

will also increase the need for a quick-strike offense. Cespedes remains the Mets' best chance to produce crooked numbers. —J.S.



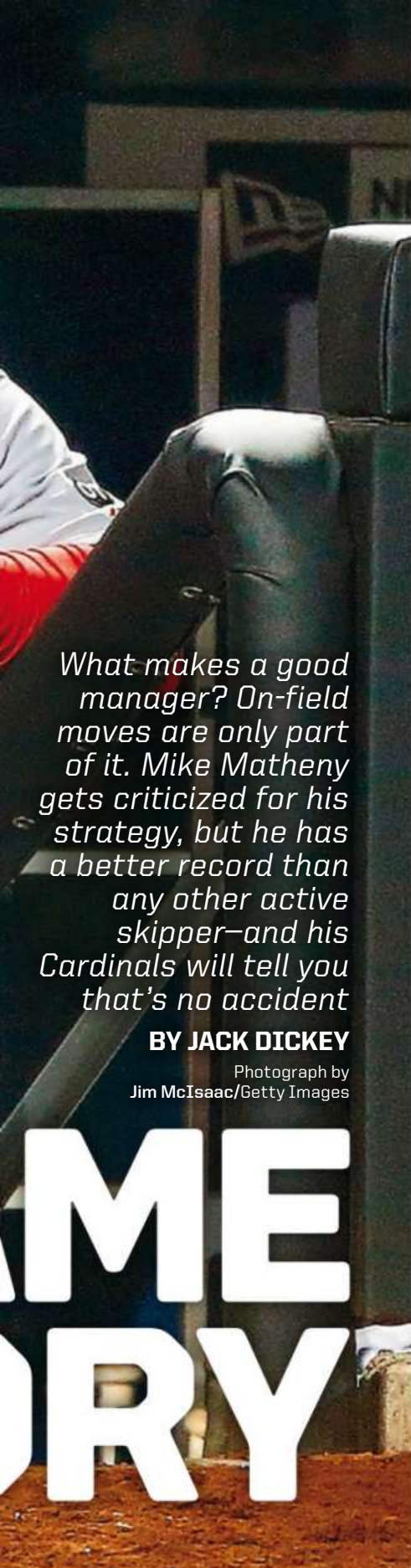
fractured clubhouse, no doubt,” Gibbons says. “But this year there was something different when they showed up in spring training. There was a different intensity. It really started with Josh Donaldson and Russell Martin. Alex brought in the right guys—the right guys with talent. And then you saw guys like Encarnacion and Bautista respond to the personalities of those two.”

Still, it took Anthopoulos’s infusion of talent at the trade deadline for the Blue Jays to take off. He added short-stop Troy Tulowitzki, outfielder Ben Revere and pitchers David Price, Mark Lowe and LaTroy Hawkins. Toronto was the best of the five clubs who played .600 baseball after July 31, followed by the Cubs, Pirates, Mets and Rangers—none of whom have won a World Series in the wild-card era and whose managers (Gibbons, Joe Maddon, Clint Hurdle, Collins and Jeff Banister) have never won a World Series in 45 combined years of managing.

If this is the year dues are rewarded, Gibbons has as good a chance as anyone, which leads to one more story. One day in 2011, while Gibbons was coaching with the Royals, Ricciardi’s cellphone buzzed with a text from his friend. It was the day Gibbons achieved 10 years of major league service as a player, coach and manager, fully vesting him in the players’ association pension plan. “Today is my 10th year in the majors,” Gibbons wrote. “Thank you. Because I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

Four years later, with another trip to the minors thrown in, Gibbons is still at it, only this time in a place farther from Shelby, N.C., and San Antonio than he’s ever been: October, officially. Says Ricciardi, “I can’t tell you how happy I am for him. He’s a baseball lifer, a guy who was a high school draft pick who devoted his life to baseball with little else to fall back on. He kept at it, and now the country gets the chance to see all the great things about Gibby that all of us who know him have seen for years.” □





What makes a good manager? On-field moves are only part of it. Mike Matheny gets criticized for his strategy, but he has a better record than any other active skipper—and his Cardinals will tell you that's no accident

BY JACK DICKEY

Photograph by
Jim McIsaac/Getty Images

MEMORY
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THE BEST baseball managers are like magicians—the trick is truly accomplished only when its mechanics are so well-hidden that the audience begins to wonder if there was ever any trick at all. Strategic decisions should be adroit yet seem obvious in retrospect; matters of player effort and team chemistry, however messy, should be resolved in-house. And as another regular season reached its end with the injury-ravaged Cardinals proudly atop a division deeper than it has been in ages, manager Mike Matheny and his maneuverings have again eluded mass notice.

Matheny likes it that way. As a player he would never turn on the hotel-room television, afraid he might hear about himself (or not) and let it change the way he did things. When a reporter popped into his office in late September to ask the 45-year-old Matheny to talk about how he got here, he politely declined. “His preference is a lower profile [rather] than a higher profile,” says John Mozeliak, St. Louis’s general manager. “I think he’d prefer you say something bad than something good.”

But he has a .579 win percentage in his four seasons, good for 13th all-time (minimum 315 games) and best among active managers. What bad is there to say?

Granted, Matheny’s tactics have occasioned some head-scratching in the playoffs, for which his record is a less sparkling 20–19. In Game 5 of the 2014 NLCS, with the score tied in the ninth

in San Francisco, he brought in a starter who hadn’t pitched in nearly a month. While the Cardinals’ closer and several setup men remained in the pen, Travis Ishikawa hit a three-run homer off Michael Wacha that ended the series. (Some Cardinals fans called it “Mathenaging.”) At times Matheny has also seemed too fond of certain veterans. In the first half of 2014, for instance, he stuck with struggling Mark Ellis and Allen Craig over promising rookies Kolten Wong and Oscar Taveras.

But Taveras’s sad story—while driving drunk in the Dominican Republic last October, he crashed, killing himself and his girlfriend—also testifies to what Matheny can do so well. During the 2014 season he had clearly been disappointed in Taveras and his conditioning. But he offered a sincere, heartbroken statement before heading to the funeral, “We loved Oscar, and he loved us,” he said. “That’s where Mike’s at his strongest points,” Mozeliak says, “in times of distress.”

Do the moves make the manager? Mozeliak thinks in-game responsibilities are about 25% of a manager’s job; the rest, he says, may go unnoticed but matters more. Tony La Russa, the Hall of Famer who led the Cards for 16 seasons before Matheny, says that “to be really good you have to be a solid decision-maker. If your team doesn’t play with effort, though, you’re a total failure.”

As the playoffs begin and anxious Missourians stock up on Roloids, Matheny and his most visible decisions will face their annual scrutiny. But his players respect him and play hard for him, and that counts for something too, even if it’s hard to measure. First baseman Brandon Moss arrived via trade from the Indians on July 30, having hit .165 over the previous month. “I couldn’t have been in a worse slump,” Moss says. “He was there, telling me he was in my corner, showing he had belief in me.” Says outfielder Peter Bourjos, “Every day you look forward to coming to the field to play for him because he’s such a good guy.”

In an alternate universe, one that Matheny nearly entered, his season would

have ended weeks ago. Before he got the Cardinals' job, Matheny's greatest impact on the coaching world came by way of a 2,556-word letter he wrote in 2009 to a group of parents in the St. Louis area who wanted him to manage their boys. On its way to virality it was dubbed the Matheny Manifesto.

He wrote with the zealous maxims of a debate club president, condemning parents who indulged their own worst competitive tendencies, and vowed that his team would play the game the right way. (Perhaps this sounds familiar to weary Cardinals detractors.) The league would teach the boys to become better men, using Christianity as its underpinning.

One representative passage reads, "The boys will be required to show up ready to play every time they come to the field. That means shirts tucked in, hats on straight, and no pants drooping to their knees. There is never an excuse for lack of hustle on a baseball field. From the first step outside the dugout they will hustle." Matheny says the letter went over "like a lead balloon" when he read it aloud to the parents. One by one, though, many of them bought in, and a small league took shape. The Louisville Slugger Warriors are still going.

Earlier this year, with the help of author Jerry B. Jenkins, Matheny turned the Manifesto into a short book of the same name, which functions primarily as a meditation on the purpose and state of youth sports but smuggles in bits of autobiography here and there.

Matheny's upbringing and baseball career explain the kind of manager he has become. His father worked construction; once, when Mike and two of his three brothers got into trouble, Jerry Matheny brought home a dump truck's worth of dirt and

CHAIN OF COMMAND

Matheny thrived with the defense-first Cardinals under La Russa (below), then gave way when Molina (above) was ready to start.



made the boys spend two days moving it to the backyard with shovels and a wheelbarrow. When they finished, he made them move it back.

Mike became one of the best-regarded catcher prospects in the state. He spurned the minors (the Blue Jays drafted him in the 31st round in 1988) for the University of Michigan. The Brewers took him in the

eighth round in '91.

As a pro he did everything but hit. (In fact his career OPS+, or on-base plus slugging adjusted for park and era, is the second-worst for live-ball era catchers with at least 3,000 plate appearances.) He fielded his position well, handled pitchers wisely and was sturdy as a beam. Once, while hitting in Milwaukee, he took a 90-mph fastball to the face. He stayed standing, took a step or two and then calmly spat out what must have been half a pint of blood as though it were tobacco

juice. He insisted on playing the next day.

But whatever his other strengths, a player who hit like Matheny needed more organizational buy-in than most. The Brewers and the Blue Jays nontendered him in consecutive off-seasons, but before 2000 he found a perfect match in La Russa and pitching coach Dave Duncan's Cardinals. "Dunc and I always valued the outstanding defensive catcher who cared about handling your pitching," La Russa says. "If he went 0 for 4 but we had a shutout, we'd be thrilled."

In a game that first year, with the Cardinals ahead of Milwaukee 1-0 and men on first and second, La Russa asked Matheny to lay down a sacrifice bunt to set up Rick Ankiel, then a 20-year-old pitcher with a great swing. Matheny did his job, the runners advanced—and Ankiel hit a three-run homer. La Russa recalls that after the win, some veteran players stormed into his office to berate him for embarrassing Matheny. La Russa told them they should first ask Matheny if he had indeed been embarrassed. He said he hadn't minded. "He had that sort of strategic mind—and he inspired that kind of loyalty," La Russa says.

Matheny won three Gold Gloves in

SI'S PICK

L.A. STORY

The Dodgers will go all the way this year. Here's why

THE RECEIVED

wisdom that great starting pitching wins in the playoffs doesn't always hold up. For every 1995 Braves or 2001 Diamondbacks, teams that rode Hall of Fame starters at their peaks to world championships,

there's a 1996 Braves or 2002 Diamondbacks, teams that missed the mark with those same hurlers. In the modern baseball postseason there is no right answer, so picking the Dodgers to win the World Series has to be about more than just Clayton Kershaw and Zack Greinke, the Koufax and Drysdale of the iWhiff age. Those two mean that the Dodgers will have the best starter in most of their playoff games, but ask the '11 Phillies how much that helped.

No, Los Angeles's strengths run deeper than the top of its rotation. The lineup, finally healthy with the returns of Howie Kendrick, Yasiel Puig and Enrique Hernandez, is the best among NL playoff teams, with a .326 OBP and a .413 SLG, and Don Mattingly heads into October with the most reliable bullpen he's had all year. Kenley Jansen is still the wipeout closer, with lefty J.P. Howell and righty Chris Hatcher in front of him. That trio led the Dodgers' bullpen to an ERA of 3.72 over the last month, after three months above 4.00. For all the concerns about their pen, Dodgers relievers led the NL in strikeout rate and strikeout-to-walk ratio. L.A.'s path to a title works in its favor as well. Because of the NL's imbalance, the Dodgers will have to beat just one of the top three teams in the league to reach the World Series. A team that, when healthy, is deep in lefthanded bats could get through the NL playoffs without seeing more than one lefty starter.

And, yes, of course, there are Kershaw and Greinke. The two combined for video-game numbers this season: 65 starts and more than 455 innings in which they had a combined 1.90 ERA. Emphasize Kershaw's handful of bad October innings at your peril; he threw six strong innings in both his playoff starts last year before the Cardinals got to him in the seventh. He's still the best pitcher on the planet. This year he gets a ring to go with all of those trophies. —J.S.

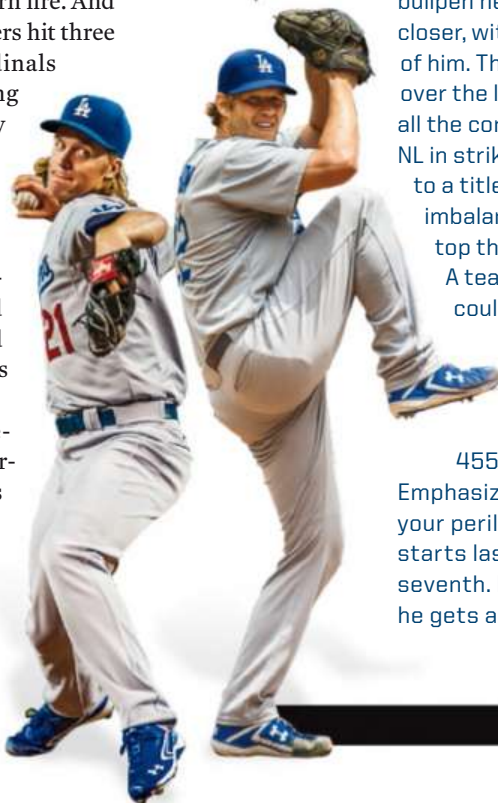
St. Louis. But by the end of 2004, with Yadier Molina ready to start—"the Prodigy," La Russa calls him—the 34-year-old Matheny and the Cardinals knew they were headed for a split. Postconcussion symptoms (he has said he suffered as many as 25 in his career) forced Matheny's retirement in 2006 after a season and a half with the Giants.

Matheny's fourth year has been his most challenging and his best. Ace Adam Wainwright and star leftfielder Matt Holliday each missed more than half of the season. Matt Adams and Mark Reynolds combined to turn first base into a black hole. The team's front office was implicated in a database-hacking scandal. And unlike in 2014, the Cardinals had two worthy opponents chasing them: the deep Pirates and the upstart Cubs.

In mid-September, in a series at Wrigley, the Cardinals and the Cubs traded beanballs—seven hit batters in three games. Joe Maddon called the Cards "vigilantes" and said, "I never read that book the Cardinals have written about how to play baseball. . . . I don't give a crap about that book."

Matheny declined to return fire. And the day after Chicago pitchers hit three St. Louis batters, the Cardinals began a five-game winning streak. A week later they would take two of three in Pittsburgh to clinch a third straight division crown. Matheny started earning some buzz for Manager of the Year, an award the cognoscenti had figured was destined for Maddon's trophy case.

In spite of their league-leading win total, the Cardinals enter the playoffs short of favorite status. Molina has an injured thumb, starter Carlos Martinez is out, and Wainwright will pitch only in relief. But, man, if they pulled off a championship? What a trick it would be. □





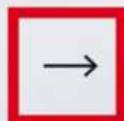
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ACK ATTACK

AS A ROOKIE, KHALIL MACK WAS ONE OF THE NFL'S BEST DEFENSIVE PLAYERS. SO WHY DID THE RAIDERS SWITCH HIS POSITION? BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE HE CAN BE AN ALL-TIME GREAT PASS RUSHER

By Austin Murphy

Photograph by
Jeff Singer for Sports Illustrated



TO PREVENT Dwyane Wade wannabes from hanging from the rims on their basketball court, the elders at the Miracle Prayer Temple in Fort Pierce, Fla., had the goals mounted at 11 feet. This failed to stop the 15-year-old Khalil Mack from dunking on those hoops. So claimed the Raiders defensive end after a recent practice, and we are inclined to believe him. At the 2014 NFL scouting combine, three months before Oakland snatched him with the fifth pick, Mack popped a 40-inch vertical jump.

He recalled his days at the Miracle Prayer Temple, where his family still worships, while walking off the practice field last Thursday. Behind him, the names emblazoned along a fence, was a roll call of Raiders Hall of Famers, from Jim Otto, George Blanda and Fred Biletnikoff to Howie Long, Marcus Allen and Tim Brown. Of course, it's still ridiculously early—just a month into Mack's sophomore NFL season—to begin updating the signage, but the buzz building around him is that he has the talent and temperament to eventually end up in that company.

This turn of events would have stunned the younger Mack, whose passion was basketball. But there came the fateful Sunday, during a break in Bible study and with a small crowd watching, when he set out to demonstrate his dunking prowess. He was not thinking of Proverbs 16:18—*Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*—as he planted his foot to leap.

"I was trying to show everybody," says Mack, "but as soon as I jumped, it tore off the bone."

It being the patellar tendon attaching his left kneecap to his tibia. "We heard something pop, and he went down. I almost passed out," recalls Khalil's father, Sandy. "But

“THERE’S REALLY NO CEILING FOR HIM,” SAYS LOFTON.

I had to stay strong—I didn’t want him to know I was freaking out on the inside.”

That injury, which terminated Mack’s high school hoops career, proved to be a blessing. Mack was a junior at Westwood High when then football coach Waides Ashmon summoned him from chemistry class. Even though Mack didn’t play a varsity sport, he was a ferocious workout warrior—always had been. When Khalil was eight, Sandy recalls, he could drop and knock out 50 uninterrupted push-ups. At 17, he was built like Apollo Creed. Ashmon noticed. “What do I have to do,” he asked Mack, “to get you on my football field?”

“I’ll play, as long as my dad says it’s O.K.,” he told Ashmon, who cold-called Sandy right there in the corridor. Mack père’s concerns were academic: He wanted his son to graduate. Football, he worried, might distract Khalil from his studies. Football, countered Ashmon, would get him into college.

He was right, but it was no sure thing. A steady stream of recruiters passed through Westwood during fall 2008, Mack’s single season. But they were there to woo all-state defensive end Luther Robinson and quarterback Isaac Virgin, who signed with Miami and South Florida, respectively. Mack’s athleticism was off the charts—he had 140 tackles for the Panthers—but he was so raw that most coaches were scared off.

Robert Wimberly felt sure that Mack would metamorphose, once he’d been coached up, into a monster. Wimberly was an assistant at Liberty, an FCS program in Lynchburg, Va., who’d studied the kid on film. After visiting the Mack family at their

OUT OF ORDER

After a stellar career at Buffalo (below), Mack was the fifth choice in the 2014 draft; the first four teams to pick might now want a do-over.



modest duplex in Fort Pierce, Wimberly secured a verbal commitment from the senior—not surprising, considering how comfortable Khalil and his parents, Yolanda and Sandy, felt with Liberty’s emphasis on Christian values. Also, Mack had no other offers.

Wimberly did worry that some big-time program would finally see what he was seeing and swoop in to snatch Mack from him. “In the last two weeks of recruiting,” he says, “we lose a lot of guys to FBS schools.”

In the end Liberty did lose Mack. In January ’09, Turner Gill hired Wimberly to coach linebackers at Buffalo. The Bulls had just won the MAC championship and were coming off the program’s best season in a half century. Clued in by Wimberly, Gill sold Mack on Buffalo. After his son took his official visit, “in January, with four feet of snow on the ground,” Sandy recalls, “he came back and said he wanted to go to Buffalo.”

KEN NORTON JR. is 49 now, his bowlegged gait featuring a pronounced limp. “Can’t a grown man have a sore knee without needin’ a new one?” he asks, with feigned irritation, when the subject of his bum right knee arises. Norton, Oakland’s first-year defensive coordinator, played 13 NFL seasons at linebacker, winning three Super Bowls and appearing in three Pro Bowls. His role, as he sees it, is to help Mack manifest his greatness, of which he’s seen glimpses, and to be a bit of a wet blanket along the way.

Norton and his boss, coach Jack Del Rio, played a combined 24 NFL seasons at linebacker. After collaborating this past off-



KHALIL MACK

season, they concluded that the 6' 3", 250-pound Mack—who played outside linebacker as a rookie—would be better utilized at defensive end. “We felt the more we could rush him, the more we could get him going after the quarterback, the better off he would be,” says Norton. “Because as good a linebacker as he is, he’s *really* good rushing the passer.”

Yes, Mack’s sack numbers were light last season. No, that doesn’t mean he was ineffective. Not remotely. Pro Football Focus credited him with 40 hurries, ranking him second in the league among 4–3 outside linebackers. And that was only half his game. “He’s a great pass rusher, but he’s [also] really good in the run game,” Cardinals quarterback Carson Palmer effused last October. Palmer, not known for hyperbole, described Mack as “phenomenal.”

Seconding that motion was, among others, ex-NFL running back and ESPN analyst Merrill Hoge, who last November judged Mack to be “the best linebacker in the National Football League, and . . . the best against the run.” If not the best, he was right in the conversation: Of Mack’s 75 tackles in 2014, 52 of them were for a loss, or within three yards of the line of scrimmage. His 11½ “stuffs”—tackles at or behind the line of scrimmage—ranked second in the league, behind Texans end J.J. Watt.

“I’ve never seen a guy in his second year with his ability,” says Oakland linebacker Curtis Lofton, now in his eighth pro season. “There’s really no ceiling for him.”

True, many of the best pass rushers the game has known have been taller, rangier: Deacon Jones, Reggie White, Richard Dent, DeMarcus Ware. But some aren’t. “Look at Lawrence

Taylor, Derrick Thomas, Von Miller,” says Norton. “Those guys aren’t 6' 5". But they had great timing, they read the offensive tackle really well. They had a *knack*.”

Norton isn’t saying Mack could be the next LT or Derrick Thomas or any of that Hall of Fame crew. He’s saying the 24-year-old has the wherewithal to get there—the physical tools plus “the intangibles. He’s serious. He’s purposeful. He understands that he’s been given a gift.” In addition to mentoring him, elder Raiders statesmen and defenders such as Justin Tuck and Charles Woodson also remind Mack that he’s still learning how to use his gifts. “As much as everybody wants to talk about how good he is,” Norton goes on, “they’re there to say, *Hey, you really haven’t done anything*. Two sacks this year, four last year. Really? I mean, *come on*.”

Mack notched his third sack of this season in the fourth quarter of Oakland’s last-second, 22–20 loss in Chicago on Sunday. But his biggest play may have come on the previous series, when he pressured quarterback Jay Cutler into a flutterball interception snared by Woodson. On another key play Mack flushed Cutler up in the pocket and into the arms of Aldon Smith, who picked up his first sack of the season.

Smith is the talented but troubled ex-49er who was cut loose by that club in August, following his arrest on DUI, hit-and-run and vandalism charges. (Smith denies the allegations.) It was his fifth arrest since 2012; for these latest charges he was scheduled to be arraigned on Oct. 6. While Smith’s presence on the field presents a conundrum for opposing offensive lines—“You gotta pick your poison,” Mack notes—his presence in Oakland’s locker room is a reminder of how dramatically the cultures, the identities, of the NFL’s Bay Area clubs have flip-flopped in recent years. The Raiders, who long cultivated an image as the bad boys of the league, have let the 49ers pull well ahead in one undesirable statistic: With 12 arrests dating to January 2012, San Francisco has served as a kind of halfway house for NFL hard cases.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the teams are going in opposite directions as well. The one that played in three straight NFC title games between the 2011 and ’13 seasons is 1–3 and atrocious on offense, where the weekly regression of quarterback Colin Kaepernick has been grimly fascinating. Meanwhile, across the Bay, the team that so recently stank is 2–2 and looking like a playoff contender, as Derek Carr—the grandson of Pentecostal pastors—has, in just his second season, shown the stuff of a franchise quarterback. Don’t tell the dog-collared, spike-shouldered denizens of the Black Hole, but the cornerstones of the franchise once known for its outlaw ethos are a couple of choirboys more comfortable in a prayer circle than in a bar.

WE TRIED our best,” says Sandy, “to raise our boys to have respect for not just us, but for others. So often when kids leave home, they act in a way where people don’t want to see ‘em coming. I don’t want that to be said about my boys.”

Khalil, in that case, is batting .500. While he tries to be respectful to everyone he meets, there are plenty of people who don’t want to see him coming: mostly offensive tackles, but also tight ends, running backs and quarterbacks.

Yes, Mack arrived in Buffalo raw as eggs but also equipped with “focus and purpose and goals and a plan,” recalls Wimberly. “A lot of colleges had passed on him, and he wanted to prove those people wrong.”

That first summer in western New York, recalls Branden Oliver, the Chargers running back who met Mack on the same snowbound recruiting trip, “we worked out so much, running hills, pushing sleds, pushing each other. We would always do more than the coaches asked.” Following team torture sessions “we’d put in some more work or come back at night,” says Oliver. “There really wasn’t that much else to do.”

After Mack’s redshirt season Gill took the coaching job at Kansas, bringing Wimberly with him. Buffalo’s new DC was William Inge, who remembers that even then Mack was so disruptive that the coach often had to ask the scout team to run the same play a second time, “so the rest of our defense could see it develop and get a clearer picture of how it was supposed to look.”

Mack’s third defensive coordinator, after Inge took a job with the NFL’s Bills in 2012, was the well-travelled Lou Tepper, whose 45-year career included six as coach at Illinois (1991 through ‘96). Having coached no fewer than three winners of the Butkus Award, bestowed annually on the nation’s top linebacker—Alfred Williams at Colorado and Dana Howard and Kevin Hardy at Illinois—Tepper rightly considers himself a connoisseur of the position. Indeed, he’s written the book on it: *Complete Linebacking*.

Tepper tends to divide ‘backers into two groups: the elite pass rushers—in addition to Williams, he had Bruce Smith at Virginia Tech and Simeon Rice at Illinois—and the better-rounded linebackers who were hammers against the run: Hardy, Howard, Mike Johnson, Brady James.

SIDE JOB

Vets such as Tuck (91) on the resurgent Raiders make sure Mack knows that for all his talent, he still has a lot to learn.



KHALIL MACK

Mack, he says, is the only linebacker he’s had “who could fit in with either of those groups.” As gifted as he was, though, the young man’s talents did not extend to every sport. Upon introducing the new coordinator to the team, then coach Jeff Quinn mentioned that Tepper was an excellent racquetball player. Mack, who’d played some spirited matches with his father, followed up on that, asking Tepper during a linebackers meeting, “Coach, this racquetball thing. Would you actually play real athletes, like us?”

A match was arranged. With a fair number of Mack’s teammates looking on from the balcony, the 67-year-old Tepper won all three games: “Fifteen-love, 15–4, 15–2,” the coach recalls. “His shirt was soaked. Mine was dry as a bone.” *Pride goeth before destruction. . .*

TALK TO the people in Mack’s life, and you’re going to hear some Scripture. In addition to his trove of linebacking tips, Tepper shared with Mack a verse from Philippians: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourself.*

By his senior season at Buffalo, his humility notwithstanding, he was earning a reputation as one of the best players in country—on either side of the ball. In Buffalo’s opener, a 40–20 loss at Ohio State, he had 9½ tackles, including 2½ sacks and a 45-yard interception return for a touch-

down. “He is a fantastic football player,” raved Buckeyes coach Urban Meyer. “He could play at any school in America.”

His stock keeps rising. If the NFL somehow agreed to a do-over of the 2014 draft, Mack would likely be taken ahead of at least three of the four players who went ahead of him: Jadeveon Clowney in Houston, Greg Robinson in St. Louis and Sammy Watkins in Buffalo. The Jaguars, who desperately needed a quarterback, might stick with Blake Bortles. Or, watching Mack’s tape, they might not.

“He had a wonderful humility,” Tepper remembers. “And I hope all the adulation and money doesn’t change him.”

Not to worry, Lou. Mack remains the same homebody who “never did seek a lot of attention,” Yolanda recalls.

He’s not the type of guy who’s going to make a few plays, and it’s gonna go to his head,” Norton assures. “He’s smart. He’s serious. He’s here to do something.”

He respects the gift.

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HALFWAY THERE

BY STEVE RUSHIN



FIFTY, IN FOOTBALL, means Mike Singletary, good field position and the best possible seat for a spectator. But bear in mind, as the NFL celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl with those golden number 50s on each stadium's 50-yard line—that 50 is only halfway to the house, and football's *real* magic number is 100.

The field, of course, is 100 yards long, and a 100-yard game remains the standard of excellence for a running back or receiver. Every number from 00 to 99—Jim Otto to Warren Sapp—has been worn by an NFL player, but never that sacrosanct figure: 100. Rendered as a Roman numeral, 100 is C, which might as well stand for Change, because

the NFL will see an extraordinary amount of it in the 50 years leading up to Super Bowl 100. And what a beautiful visual that is—100—the skinny QB of the 1, sneaking behind the two rotund blockers of the zeroes.

With that number in mind, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED and *Wired* are debuting a joint project this week called **Super Bowl 100**. Throughout the season the two magazines and our websites—SI.com and Wired.com—will explore, in stories and in video, the enormous changes that football will see over the next five decades. The revolution is already under way in player training and tracking, data analysis, stadium and equipment design, and the treatment and prevention of concussions—all leading to a vast array of technological marvels that will make the league, 50 years from now, resemble the love child of Georges Halas and Lucas.

By the time the MVP of Super Bowl 100 is given the keys to his flying car, we won't know what hit us, though virtual reality will allow us to feel as if we've just been hit by the gunner on a kickoff team. Speaking of which, our series kicks off here with an exploration of how far athletes might one day go to get an edge. (Data-tracking implants, anyone?) Our series will conclude just before Super Bowl 50 in February, when SI and *Wired* will publish a sci-fi dispatch from Super Bowl 100, in the year 2066.

For the moment, however, we remain rooted in the right now, with nearly 50 Super Bowls down and nearly 50 Super Bowls to go, which puts us at a metaphorical midfield, the proper place for the coin flip that gets this whole show started. Call it in the air. □

TRAIN OF THOUGHT

■ **WITH THE** rollout this season of RFID (radio-frequency identification) player-tracking technology in every NFL stadium—bottle-cap-sized chips are embedded in every set of shoulder pads—the league can keep tabs on all of its players the same way that businesses do their inventories. The system, provided by Zebra Technologies and still largely kept under wraps by the NFL, is geared partly toward improving the TV experience, but when that data is opened up to fans and teams, things could get really interesting. We could soon see the routes every player runs, answering the question, *Which Patriots receiver best matches up with Tom Brady?* Strength and conditioning coaches could slice and dice data to extract whatever performance metrics they most care about—*How far does Adrian Peterson actually run in each game?*—and use that information to fine-tune training methods.

Zebra's system, though, is really only data lite. This setup tracks a player's pads, not the human wearing them. To truly understand what each athlete goes



through requires far more detailed telemetry. As a hint of where that is headed, consider: Zebra's tags can also be used as communication hubs to relay info from any Bluetooth devices that a player might be wearing.

The next big question: How far are players and coaches willing to go to gain an edge? Forget fitness wearables like Apple Watches and Fitbits—pushing limits on the field will require pushing far more personal limits. As director of Elite Performance for STATS LLC, Paul Robbins explores the world of wearables, patches and sensors on behalf of pro teams, and to show the future of the field, he carries around a half-inch by one-eighth-of-an-inch medical implant used for tracking heart rhythms. "When guys complain about a patch," Robbins says, "I pull out the implant and say, 'We *could* just imbed this into your chest.'"

This seemingly distant future is much closer to the present in the world of endurance sports, where athletes are already using a host of medical technologies, from Band-Aid sized patches that were initially designed for tracking patient vital signs to continuous blood glucose monitors intended for diabetics. The problem with these types of sensors is the sheer volume of data they generate and how to best use that info. "We're still moving out of a crude era," says Sky Christopherson, a former Olympic track cyclist who embraced the power of big data when he trained the U.S.'s silver-medal-winning women's team pursuit squad for London 2012. "It's going to take some time until you really can individualize [training] to get each person to their potential."

Perhaps the most interesting—certainly the most personal—physiological data will come from DNA. An athlete's genetic code may be the real key to reaching his or

her full potential. Genes control how our bodies work, and variations on those genes are responsible for physical differences. Beyond hair and eye color, gene variants affect how our bodies create collagen, the main structural protein from which ligaments are made, and

The '08 Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act made it illegal to take action against an employee based on DNA testing, but that legislation ignores the fact that once something is known, it's nearly impossible to ignore.

The truly dark side of



FAST TRACK

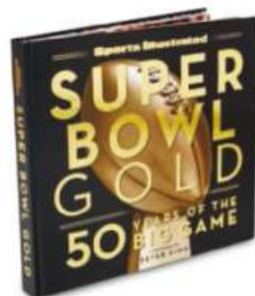
Zebra's chips—working with skybox computers—tell us what a Giants kickoff return looks like. The DNA-driven future looks much scarier.

how we respond to supplements. Knowing an athlete's genetic makeup could guide dietitians in designing nutrition programs, or it could predict whether an athlete is at greater risk of, say, an ACL tear, allowing coaches to tweak training around that fragility. "If we know where you're weak," says Jeremy Koenig, CEO of Athletigen, which uses DNA analysis to improve performance, "we can make you strong."

As DNA testing of athletes becomes more widespread, the line between personal medical data and a player's personnel file will blur. We've already seen the issues this can cause: In 2005, after Eddy Curry missed 13 games with an irregular heartbeat, the Bulls asked their center to take a DNA test; he declined and was traded. "Pro athletes are people, and they should be respected as such; their info is private," says Koenig. "But some would argue otherwise, that they're a human asset."

DNA analysis, though, might be in CRISPR/cas9, an existing technology that allows scientists to physically edit genetic code. Taken to its unethical extreme, CRISPR could render all of these ideas about nurturing imperfection redundant. Why would anyone ever dream of tweaking Brady or Peterson when you could just splice the two together?

—Tom Taylor



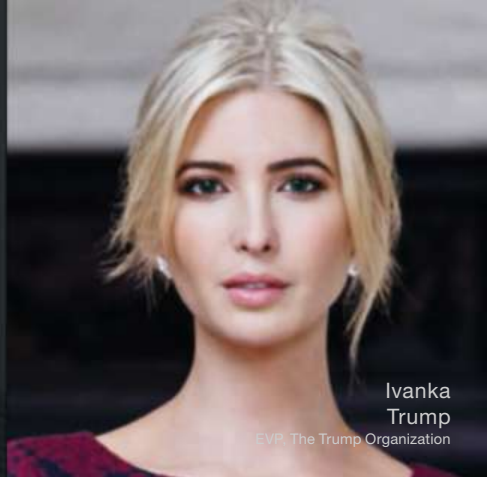
There's beauty in the past too. SI's new **Super Bowl Gold** book covers five decades of the big game with new interviews from past winners and losers, plus a 1-to-49 ranking of each event.



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Kelly
Anchor, Fox News



Mary
Barra
CEO, GM



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Trump
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REACH FOR IT

When Oakman gets his long arms extended, he's hard to block, which helped him rack up 11 sacks in 2014 and two more so far this season.

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THE SIGHT OF THE ABSURDLY CHISELED, 6' 9", 275-POUND BAYLOR DEFENSIVE END SHAWN OAKMAN INTIMIDATED THE INTERNET. NOW A DETAILED LOOK AT THE FILM AND LIVE ACTION EXAMINES WHETHER HE CAN STRIKE FEAR INTO NFL QUARTERBACKS

BY GREG A. BEDARD

Photograph by
Darren Carroll for Sports Illustrated



ME TRUE



IF YOU haven't heard of Baylor senior defensive end Shawn Oakman, you will. A screen grab of him looming over Michigan State players during the coin toss before last year's Cotton Bowl, with arms bulging and his shirt rolled up to show off his chiseled abs, set off an avalanche of Twitter memes about his intimidation factor. And for his physique alone, Oakman is sure to be the talk of the NFL scouting combine in February, before the 2016 draft. The reality is, Oakman may be among the most freakish athletes ever to enter the NFL.

He's 6' 9" and 275 pounds with the upper body of a comic-book hero. Despite his absurdly long limbs, he can bench 400 pounds and squat 600. His 36-inch vertical is good for an NBA player, and he has been clocked at 4.8 seconds in the 40, a number that will certainly drop once he trains for the NFL's underwear Olympics.

Eyeing Oakman at field level, you appreciate what television or Twitter can't completely capture: He dwarfs other FBS players, like an adult crashing the neighborhood street-ball game.

I've covered the NFL for 15 years, and I've never seen a player like him. I asked Gil Brandt, who helps run the scouting combine after working as the Cowboys' vice president of player personnel from 1960 to '89, if any prospect's physical profile has matched Oakman's.

"Ed (Too Tall) Jones," he said. "That's it."

Not a bad defensive end to be compared with. At 6' 9" and 271 pounds, Jones was taken by Dallas with the No. 1 pick in 1974 out of Tennessee State. He had a superb 15-year career, with three All-Pro selections and 57½ official career sacks. (The NFL didn't keep that stat until '81; the Cowboys' unofficial count had Jones at 106.)

Oakman has said he should be in the mix for the No. 1 pick in May; that was one reason he returned to Waco for his final season. After studying six of Oakman's games from 2014 on film and scouting him in person during the Bears' 70–17 win over

Oakman is known in football-speak as a "planet guy," as in "there are only so many guys on this planet who are that large, strong and fast."

MIXED BAGS

Oakman had a chance to make a huge play in last year's loss to TCU, but a QB's block caused him to whiff on Echols-Luper.

Rice on Sept. 26, I feel confident saying Oakman will not reach his goal. In fact, if he doesn't have outstanding performances against the better teams on No. 3 Baylor's schedule, he shouldn't even be a first-round pick.

But he probably will be. That's because Oakman is what's known in football-speak as a "planet guy," as in "there are only so many guys on this planet who are that large, strong and fast." Some personnel people feel compelled to draft planet guys whenever they have the chance.

Whoever chooses Oakman will be doing so with the future in mind, believing that there's a way to unlock the wonder of his physical tools, because right now he's an average football player who has gotten into the conversation purely because of his physical attributes. Such advantages can carry a player through college, but the NFL is different; solid technique and focused intensity are essential to making it at that level. Oakman hasn't exhibited enough of either—yet.

OAKMAN SIMPLY does not make enough plays, especially for someone who has athletic advantages over most of his opponents and, at 23, is usually older too. He tied the Baylor career sack record with his 15th against Rice, but only five of those have come against FBS teams with winning records. That includes the Owls of Conference USA, who aren't exactly a powerhouse. On his first real pass-rushing opportunity against Rice, third-and-13, Oakman failed to disengage from a left tackle who's small (6' 5", 260 pounds) even by Texas high school standards.

Still, he has time to make his case. The Bears have yet to face West Virginia, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and TCU, not to mention a bowl opponent. He must take advantage of those opportunities because in his two biggest games last season, against TCU and Michigan State, Oakman was nowhere near productive enough.

In No. 5 Baylor's 61–58 come-from-behind victory





over the ninth-ranked Horned Frogs last season, fans could have forgotten Oakman was on the field. Yes, because left end Jamal Palmer was out with a torn ACL, Oakman was switched from his usual right side, and he was going against right tackle Halapoulivaati Vaitai, a well-built 6' 6", 315-pound blocker who should be in the NFL next season. But even after an injury forced TCU to reshuffle its line, leaving Oakman matched against a backup, he did nothing. Baylor tried lining him up over the right guard a few times, but that made no difference. His one tackle for a loss came when he touched a running back who was already going down from someone else's work.

The play that best illustrates Oakman's failure to affect the game happened with 31 seconds left in the third quarter. TCU ran a fly sweep reverse, with receiver Cameron Echols-Luper getting the ball and running toward Oakman while looking to throw downfield. The only thing separating Oakman from making a huge sack was 6' 2", 205-pound quarterback Trevone Boykin. Did Oakman blast through

KEEPING UP WITH JONES

Oakman resembled Too Tall when he took down Cook in the Cotton Bowl, but to match Jones's 15-year All-Pro career, he needs to hone his technique and amp up his intensity.

Boykin's block? No. Did he use his leaping ability and wingspan to engulf the 6-foot Echols-Luper? No. Oakman was easily nudged out of the play by Boykin, who paid no physical price, and Echols-Luper completed a 59-yard pass.

A top 10 NFL pick would have wrecked that play.

In the 42–41 loss to the Spartans, Oakman had his highlight of the year when he beat acclaimed left tackle Jack Conklin around the outside for a sack with 3:55 left in the first quarter on a third-and-12. Oakman used nice handwork to thwart Conklin's initial strike, then stuck his foot in the ground to change direction and chased down quarterback Connor

Cook. But this was really a coverage sack. Oakman hit Cook 3.31 seconds after the snap; after three seconds a quarterback is simply holding the ball too long. And while the 6' 6", 325-pound Conklin is a possible first-round NFL pick, he isn't fleet, so he could well end up a right tackle or guard at the next level.

Still, it was a notch on Oakman's belt. So was another play with 11:35 left in the fourth quarter, when he helped pressure Cook into an interception (later wiped out by penalty) by finally getting his long arms extended and putting Conklin on his backside. But that was it. As the Bears were giving up 21 straight points in the fourth quarter, they needed Oakman to make one play. He never did.

To be fair, though, Baylor's scheme is assignment driven, so he is often asked to take up blockers, or to assess the various read options and receiver motions then cover a certain area of the field rather than simply chase the ball. On his final snap against Rice, before giving way to the subs, Oakman appeared to let a running back go right by him for a

touchdown. But both Oakman and coach Art Briles confirmed after the game that he was asked to “long stick” the B gap (take the blockers with him), and someone else failed to fill the C gap.

OAKMAN PROJECTS as a 4–3 end in the NFL, though he has played standing up and dropped into coverage for the Bears, so he’ll also be evaluated as a 3–4 outside linebacker. If teams don’t think he’ll become the dominant pass rusher they covet for either of those spots, he could be targeted as a 3–4 end, a five-



technique who usually plays both gaps on either side of an offensive tackle. I have a hard time projecting Oakman as a 3–4 end in the NFL. While he can play with great leverage—thanks to his long, strong arms—run blockers can move him fairly easily when he doesn’t play with the proper technique.

There’s more to it, though. Oakman is top heavy: While his legs are strong in testing, they are skinny. Defensive line coaches would rather have their anchor players built from the ground up, with big calves, thighs and backsides. “It’s a legit concern with him,” said an NFL scout who watched the Rice game with me in the press box.

Arik Armstead is another imposing specimen who didn’t dominate in college, but the 49ers took the Oregon product with the 17th pick in April’s draft. Armstead is 6’ 7” and 292 pounds, and he’s thicker in the lower body. Plus, he ran a 5.1 in the 40-yard dash. That’s interior speed. Oakman has exterior speed that would be wasted inside.

Better physical comparisons with Oakman are

LOOKING OUT
Baylor plays a lot of assignment football, which can limit Oakman’s freedom and negate his natural advantages.

Texans 3–4 linebacker Jadeveon Clowney (6’ 5”, 266, 4.53 40-yard dash), Bengals 4–3 end Michael Johnson (6’ 7”, 266, 4.75), Bills 4–3 end Mario Williams (6’ 7”, 295, 4.73) and Packers 3–4 linebacker Julius Peppers (6’ 6”, 283, 4.6). Clowney went No. 1 in 2014, Williams was the first choice in ’06, and Peppers was picked second in ’02. However, they were all more fluid than Oakman, who plays stiffly and shows little ability to bend the pocket, leveraging his body sideways as he rushes forward to pinch in on the quarterback (think Dwight Freeney or Von Miller). Plus, each of them dominated in college.

That’s why Johnson is the best comp. Despite his physical gifts, scouts were leery because Johnson had only 10 sacks in his first three seasons at Georgia Tech before erupting for nine as a senior. That inconsistency led to questions about his work ethic and his love of the game, common concerns about underachievers that will certainly be raised about Oakman. Even after his strong senior year, Johnson dropped to Cincinnati in the third round in 2009.

After a slow start in the NFL, with 11½ sacks in his first three seasons, Johnson developed into a solid player in 2012, when he matched his career sack total. That was enough to earn him a five-year, \$44 million contract from the Buccaneers as a free agent in ’14. He was released after a season and returned to the Bengals, but Johnson’s story will likely help Oakman’s draft prospects should he finish strong at Baylor. Johnson showed that a talented defensive end could put it all together late in college and have a sustained career in the NFL.

I **N WACO** there are no doubts about Oakman’s enthusiasm for football. Briles could not be more steadfast in his belief in Oakman, who is an obvious and easy leader of his teammates. “His last 18 months have been as clean as any pro that we’ve had on our team,” Briles says. “And we’ve had some guys who changed the last year and a half because they know what’s at the end of the rainbow.”

“He doesn’t have a barrier around him. To me, that gives him a chance to be great. If you let people in, then you allow yourself to be helped.”

NFL teams will make other off-the-field inquiries. One will be about his mother’s influence. Shawn acknowledges that Vernetta Oakman had substance abuse issues during his childhood in Philadelphia—according to each, she has gotten clean—which at times left Oakman and his three siblings homeless. When Shawn was 10, the state took custody of the kids and he was placed with his mother’s cousin Kenn

IN A RUSH

Ohio State's Joey Bosa and Oklahoma State's Emmanuel Ogbah appear to be first-round locks, with Oakman, Michigan State's Shilique Calhoun and Oregon's DeForest Buckner likely to go on opening night if they perform well. Here are five other pure DEs who could work their way into the top round. —Colin Becht



**SHAQ
LAWSON**
Junior
Clemson

The 6' 3", 270-pound Lawson showed his skills in last Saturday's 24-22 win over Notre Dame, when he took it to All-America left tackle Ronnie Staley. Lawson had 3½ tackles for a loss and once forced Staley to tackle him to avoid a sack.



**JONATHAN
ALLEN**
Junior
Alabama

After racking up 11½ tackles for loss, 5½ sacks and a first-team All-SEC selection last year, Allen added about 15 pounds; he's now 6' 3" and 283. So far, so good: Allen has three sacks, including two in the season-opening win over Wisconsin.



**CARL
NASSIB**
Senior
Penn State

The former walk-on and brother of Giants backup QB Ryan had just seven tackles and one sack in 2014; the 6' 7" 272-pounder already has eight sacks, an interception and three forced fumbles this season.



**JONATHAN
BULLARD**
Senior
Florida

He got a "stay in school" grade from the draft advisory committee, and he's capitalizing on that advice with 9½ tackles for loss and 4½ sacks. At 6' 3", 283 pounds, Bullard has great strength, and all but one of his sacks have come against SEC foes.



**BRONSON
KAUFUSI**
Senior
BYU

The 6' 8", 280-pound Kaufusi doesn't need to get a sack to disrupt a passing attack. He has broken up 12 passes over the last two seasons, and already has four tackles for loss, two sacks and an interception this year.

Roberts and his wife, Tracy, in Lansdowne, Pa. Kenn, then in the Army, ran a no-nonsense household.

Oakman believes that background will help him when he turns pro. "I was raised by a military man, and he was the breadwinner for the family," Oakman says. "He told me the right way to do things. You can't help somebody more than they want to be helped. So there are no handouts. Just like they did with me here [at Baylor]. They could show me the right path to take, but they didn't give me anything."

Oakman originally went to Penn State but, despite the Robertses' efforts, he admits he was too full of himself and focused on the wrong things. After getting in trouble for being late and skipping classes, Oakman was arrested for shoplifting a sandwich (for which he paid a fine), and Bill O'Brien, now the Texans' coach, kicked him off the team. But O'Brien gave Briles a glowing recommendation for Oakman, who got a second chance. Even though he was suspended for the second game this season for a violation of team rules, Oakman said NFL teams

should have no concerns about his leaving the Waco bubble that has served him well.

"Have you ever lost everything?" he says. "When you lose everything, you don't ever want to lose it again. I lost my mother. I lost my brothers. I lost my sisters. I lost football. What else could you take from me? I've done it all, been through it all. There isn't much out there for me except this game and helping my family get to the promised land."

The NFL will appreciate that desire, but scouts will probe Oakman's eccentricities—he has three American bulldogs; walks around Waco with his python, Baloo, around his neck; and often sports a green or purple Mohawk. NFL teams prefer conformity, and general managers may see him as a guy who could be distracted by the trappings of being a pro athlete.

Those are secondary issues, however. Before they matter, Oakman will have to show that his ability to rush the passer can match the rare tools he possesses. Right now, they don't. And that's no hype. □



Check out SI's College Football podcast each week for the latest news, big-game previews and inside scoop at SI.com/podcasts





Penitence *Race*

FOR THE 82ND STRAIGHT YEAR, THERE'S NO WORLD SERIES IN OUR NATION'S CAPITAL. BUT THERE'S REASON TO BELIEVE, D.C.: AFTER DECADES IN THE DESERT, ONE FAN HAS DONE HIS PART TO TURN THE FATES IN YOUR FAVOR

BY DAVID SIMON

Illustration by
Kagan McLeod for Sports Illustrated



THE STATIC of the broadcast, the AM-band crackle that the cheap transistor spit up every time it swung or bounced—even this I remember. Just as I recall the heat from the water in the hallway fountain, its cooling mechanism never quite functional. And the godawful smell of the secondary wing boys' room.

It is 1971, and I am new to the fifth grade at Rock Creek Forest Elementary School, a few hundred yards north of the D.C. line in suburban Maryland, where everything is perfectly Proustian, perfectly preserved in memory.

I have been on the playground, playing strikeout with Firestone and Bjellos. It is an April afternoon, after school hours, yet unseasonably hot in my memory. I am wishing the water cooler actually worked, stumbling into the boys' room to take a leak before drifting back to the game.

On my little Sanyo, Frank Howard launches a grand slam off the Oakland A's starter, some fella with the improbable name of Blue. It is Opening Day. And though this is Washington Senators baseball, all things are still possible.

Two years earlier, in fact, my Nats, managed by the great Ted Williams, finished above the hated Yankees for the first time in my short life in a season when both played better than .500 ball. These guys are due. They have always been due. This, perhaps, is the year they pay out.



DAY OF ATONEMENT

Mike Epstein follows Howard to the plate, and I rest the radio on the boys' sink. Epstein, my favorite. Superjew—and yes, that is his actual nickname. Thirty home runs in '69 hitting behind Howard, who had 48 jacks that year. And in '70, Epstein added 20 more.

Is there a hero more tailored to my existence? Is it possible to overstate the sociocultural and psychological import of a power-hitting Hebrew playing first base for the Washington Senators, the hometown team of a skinny, slap-hitting Jewish runt from Silver Spring, Md.? Surely, Mike Epstein, standing astride my childhood like a colossus for all the Chosen, is a personalized gift from the god of my fathers. To whom I now pray:

"Dear God," I offer aloud, my words echoing against the drab brown walls of the bathroom. "If you let Mike Epstein hit a home run right now, I will never, ever skip Hebrew school again."

Whereupon the very next pitch is launched into the rightfield upper deck of Robert F. Kennedy Stadium. Back-to-back with Howard. The Opening Day crowd cheering wildly because maybe, just maybe, this is the year, with the Nats embarrassing this Blue fella and shutting out Oakland to begin the great exodus from Egypt and bondage.

And here, now, comes the worst and most frightening image in this sequence of memory: That of a mop-headed boychild, arms above him, cheering wildly, his image reflected back from the old oxidized mirror above the school bathroom sink. I can still see that fool kid. Right now, in my mind's eye, I am looking at him as his moment of delirious joy evaporates into near Biblical loathing and terror.

What did I just promise God?

Oh.

No.



I'M NOT AN IDIOT, or a fundamentalist. A sentient grown-up cannot take seriously the notion of petitional prayer in any sporting contest. Any modernist knows that a divine entity who would intervene in human affairs to hang a curveball or block a field goal is a deity with too much time on His hands. Any god who actually exists has to be playing for larger stakes than a playoff win or, worse, a five-year contract with built-in incentives. The sight of a wide receiver falling to one knee and crossing himself in the end zone is an affront to any theology that can matter. And we must concede that a serious god in whom real purposes abide cannot possibly give himself over to punishing the random collective of northside Chicago baseball enthusiasts merely because they don't live in St. Louis.

David Simon is creator, writer and executive producer of the HBO series *The Wire*, *Treme* and *Show Me a Hero*.

BACK IN THE FOLD

The author (near right) and Epstein (below and far right) took shelter from a rainout after the former player received personalized Nationals swag in English and Hebrew.



So, O.K., no worries. I made a vow and I broke it. Within three weeks I was again cutting out of Hebrew school on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, hanging with friends, creeping down Beach Drive to play basketball in Rock Creek Park. But so what?

God, if He even exists, is good, or at least noninterventionist—an Unmoved Mover, as Aristotle would say, who rules from a heaven with high walls and leaves small matters of athleticism to men. A child's vow over such nonsense is unheard.

Except a little more than a month after that long-ago Opening Day, Mike Epstein, my favorite player, was traded to the Athletics. And by the following season my entire hometown baseball franchise, the Senators, was shipped to Texas to become the Rangers.

I did the rest of my growing up in Washington without baseball. And when I moved to Baltimore in late 1983, I could in no way enjoy the Orioles' victory in the World Series that year. The O's of old were Canaanites, a savage crew of Moloch-worshippers who routinely marched south against my tribe, with the Robinsons and Palmer and McNally and Boog smiting and martyring the Nats at will.

I rooted for Philly in that Series, and only embraced the Orioles when they began the '88 season with 21 straight losses. As only a Senators fan will, I came to my second franchise when it was in the basement, and for a long time the elevator did not move.

So note:

It is now nearly half a century since a small boy asked



EVER HAPPENED,” says Mike Epstein. The phone line goes silent. “No way,” he adds. Finally, I say something clever: “What?” “I never hit a home run off Vida Blue, and I never hit a home run on Opening Day. You got it wrong.”

“But I remember it.”

“Never happened,” he repeats.

I sit there on the other end of the phone, stunned like a cow with a sledgehammer. Me. In the boys’ bathroom mirror. My promise. My sin.

“Listen,” Epstein says finally. “You’re not serious about this, are you? Because, I gotta just say, you realize this whole thing is a bit, ah, egocentric.”

You think? Isn’t everything that constitutes the theology of fandom egocentric? Believers who won’t change their shirts for 16 Sundays if their team is winning? Acolytes who have to walk out of the room on a full count with loaded bases because if they stare at the television screen, the Fates will bring bad juju to the moment? Pilgrims who eat the same thing in the same inning in the same number of bites because the ritual as-

sure the outcome? Surely a direct appeal to Yahweh, the god of our forefathers, carries more gravitas than mere fate?

And no, I still don’t believe a just god intervenes in professional sports. He does not care if Mike Epstein goes deep against Vida Blue, or whoever threw that pitch on whatever day he threw it.

But does He care if a Jewish kid two years shy of his bar mitzvah promises to stop cutting out on Hebrew school?

Think on that for a moment, Mr. Epstein. Maybe this vow wasn’t about baseball. Maybe it was about theology and spirituality and the 6,000-year-old faith of our ancestors.

“You’re serious,” Epstein says wearily.

“You and me, we gotta bury this together.”

And somehow, I get this man to agree. Somehow, I convince him that the two of us hold the future of the Nationals, and possibly the Orioles as well, in our sin-stained hands.

He will come east from his home outside Denver, back to Washington. We will taste the bread of affliction together, share a Passover seder and use the Jewish holiday of liberation to commemorate the long years of wandering in baseball wilderness, to dream anew on a Promised Land flowing with milk, honey and freshly printed playoff tickets. Then, on Opening Day of the 2005 season, we will go to the old RFK Stadium, where the Montreal Expos have just relocated, and we will watch a ball game together.

I know I have Mike Epstein aboard when I can hear him

The Nationals’ and Orioles’ sickened fans are victims of the outcast who walks among them.

his god to hang a Vida Blue pitch for his hero, and neither team with which he has allied himself has to this moment returned to a World Series.

Lo, the Orioles have wandered like Israelites through Sinai since I took a mortgage in Baltimore, teased from New York by Jeffrey Maier’s mitt and mocked from Chicago by Jake Arrieta’s fastball. And the new Nats, reconstituted a decade ago, have touched the hem of greatness only to collapse at the very edge of every playoff opportunity. They ended the present season, literally, at each others’ throats.

My vow, I have come to believe, was heard. And now I am Jonah, fleeing from my God and Nineveh, unwilling to address my sin. And the Nationals and the Orioles are both ships on a storm-tossed sea, their sickened, seasick fans unwitting victims of the outcast who walks among them.

Every season since 1971, the gaping maw of the whale awaits me. I am to be swallowed, along with the hopes of any baseball team I care about, into the belly of the beast and spit up in time to do it all again when pitchers and catchers report.

I gotta get right with God.

laughing at me through the telephone.

"O.K.," he says. "You're nuts, but O.K."

All that is left for me, other than buying his plane tickets and reserving a hotel room, is to figure out my broken memory. Back-to-back home runs with Howard. Vida Blue. Opening Day. The upper-wing boys' room at Rock Creek Forest Elementary.

"I'll work on that," I tell my childhood hero. "And I'll see you next April for Passover."

Except the Old Testament god, He is not so easily appeased.

A few months before Passover in 2005, my brother-in-law, a sailing enthusiast, was caught in a storm off the Florida coast and, when a metal coupling fell from the mast, suffered an injury that would eventually prove fatal. That year's family gathering was no time to trifle with anything as obscure as baseball voodoo. And by the following season, my father had become invalidated; our Passover seders became, for several years, private affairs. I couldn't follow through with Epstein.

Season followed season. The Orioles slowly improved and made a couple decent runs toward a Series, but last year's rollover to Kansas City seemed like a high wall. The Nats, for their part, looked weak-willed the year they sat Strasburg, and last season's playoff performance was so devoid of heart that some supernatural element could be plausibly suspected. In the back of my mind, totaling up the cumulative seasons of Series-less baseball in my wake, I piled up a weight of guilt that only Jews and Roman Catholics can carry.

Verily, my God was still an angry God. So, a decade after I first contacted Mike Epstein, I called him again. He didn't return the message. Not right away. Who calls a goof like me back a second time in a single life?

I had an editor from SPORTS ILLUSTRATED follow up, if only to make my pitch more plausible. And I called the Nationals' front office, asking about the possibility of honoring one of Washington's former baseball stars. And in July I flew to Denver, where, finally, seated across from an aging but still athletic man, in a breakfast spot south of the city, I did all I could to assure my boyhood hero of both my sincerity and my sanity. I also told him I had solved the false manufacture of memory, and it was a telling corruption at that:

"When you make a promise to God, a promise that you don't keep, a promise that you then secretly blame for the trade of your favorite player and then the loss of your entire baseball team, well, you kind of want the home run to matter. And for the Senators, the only way a home run

GODS AMONG US

Epstein (with Williams in 1969, right) shared a pre-Yom Kippur meal with the author (opposite, center).



I know I have Mike Epstein aboard when I hear him laughing at me through the phone.

could matter was to have it as close to Opening Day as possible because by May. . ."

"By April, you mean," laughed Epstein, remembering. "Those teams were so bad."

"By April," I agreed, "the Washington Senators were usually out of contention."

Mike Epstein and Frank Howard hit back-to-back home runs on Aug. 17, 1970, in the first inning of a 7-0 home win over the Kansas City Royals, off a pitcher named Bob Johnson.

It was summer. A hot day in D.C. My fifth-grade year hadn't started yet, but the school building would have been open as the staff was preparing for the start of school. In August, we were routinely allowed to use the bathrooms while we hung on the blacktop and played ball. That explained why my memory had no one else in the hallway or bathroom, why I was even allowed to have a transistor radio in school that day.

Ridiculously, I had offered up a vow to God over a single at bat in the first inning of a late-season game for a sixth-place team—that was last in the old American League East—that was in no way contending for anything. Not even pride. Biblically, this is the equivalent of Esau trading his birthright to his brother for a bowl of soup. Yet over the years, as the baseball fortunes of two cities fell and as I bricked a personal prison cell using mortared blocks of Judaic guilt, I imbued that useless home run with more and more meaning.

The Senators had in fact shut out the A's on Opening Day in 1971, beating Blue in the same convincing fashion that they had shut out Johnson and the Royals. That, too, was a warm memory, one that I happily conflated with Epstein's prayed-for homer if for no other reason than to make my plea for divine intervention more purposed and romantic.

"Do you remember what pitch you hit off Johnson?"

Epstein had some memorable dingers in his career.



DAY OF ATONEMENT

Three in one game. Four in consecutive at bats. And some astonishing artillery salvos to the upper deck of RFK, where they painted the seats blue in Superjew's honor. But an August home run in a game that meant nothing?

Epstein didn't remember the at bat, much less the pitch on which he turned.

Only I did. Kinda.

EVER MEET your heroes, it has been famously said, and as an old newspaperman, I've generally been inclined to credit the adage. A hero is someone far enough away so as not to reveal himself completely.

But the Michael Peter Epstein who has put up with my on-again, off-again courtship these many years, upon our first meeting in Denver, revealed himself to be a fine, if somewhat skeptical, soul.

Now 72, he has shaped a life with successes and pleasures beyond baseball. His wife, Barbara, is a nice Jewish

And for a third act, Epstein returned to the baseball world, developing batting techniques and drills that he describes as rotational hitting—an influential and level-swinging counter-revolution to the Lau-Hriniak school that dominated the game a couple generations ago.

Asked the ageless Talmudic question—"Which is harder: hitting or preventing hitting?"—Epstein doesn't hesitate before offering his own rabbinical dissent: "Teaching hitting. That's the hardest."

It was not something that he particularly wanted to do in life, but when the greatest hitter in modern baseball history prods and pushes repeatedly, you eventually give way. And Ted Williams, having managed Epstein for two-plus seasons with the Senators, had kept a friendship with his former player.

Williams knew hitting as a precise science, of course, but teaching it? He had no patience or vocabulary for explaining himself or his skill. But he would talk hitting with Epstein.

"You gotta do this," Williams told him on one hunting trip together.

"Why me?"

"Because you're a smart sonofabitch. I can do it, but you can figure out how to explain it."

Beginning with a series of 42 articles in the *Collegiate Baseball Newspaper* in the early 2000s, Epstein codified what Williams believed about smacking a baseball with a bat into a coherent, teachable methodology. Today, Epstein Online Hitting Academy—now a second-generation enterprise with Mike's son, Jake, at the helm—has become an influential font of batting analysis and coaching, based in Littleton, Colo., with 650 certified instructors operating nationally. It is the only hitting curriculum Ted Williams ever endorsed.

For Epstein—successful as a player, as a cattleman and businessman, as a hitting guru—life has been a series of pragmatic, goal-oriented paths and pivots. You show up, you do the work, you wait on the proper result. Stray prayers and divine interventions are not currencies in which such a man generally traffics.

girl he spotted in the stands of a minor league game in Stockton, Calif., and the marriage is now a half-century strong. Three children are grown, successful and happy.

A professional ballplayer from 1964 until he retired 10 years later—just before the rise of free agency and a seller's market—Epstein was obliged to turn on a dime and embark on a second career as a businessman.

A native of the Bronx, he nonetheless learned about the cattle market, of all things, and would own and operate ranches in Oregon and Wyoming. It is probably safe to say that in meeting the man, you are shaking hands with the only lefthanded Jewish power-hitting cattleman to ever stride this planet.



UT THE OLD TESTAMENT God, the jealous God, the unforgiving God of some improbably chosen tribe of ancient desert wanderers—maybe He's not interested in your modernist sensibilities, or in your hard-won rationalism. Maybe He's keeping different stats on this world, and judging

mortals by different sabermetrics altogether. And maybe this God is not in the business of cheap forgiveness, either.

Because this ball season, on Sept. 21, the night before Yom Kippur, the sundown commencement of the Jewish Day of Atonement, I arrange to bring Mike Epstein—who remains politely dubious about the entire enterprise—to





DAY OF ATONEMENT

a stadium in the city of Washington, where the third and present incarnation of professional baseball in D.C. resides. There, just a mile or two down the Anacostia riverbank from the hollowed-out hulk in which Epstein once played, we stand in the Nationals dugout, waiting out a rain delay.

“God,” Epstein assures me, staring at the infield tarp, “is really angry at you.”

It’s an hour past the game’s scheduled start, and Epstein, having done all his interviews for local radio and pregame broadcasts, stands with a team escort at his side. In the escort’s hand are a Nationals jersey with Epstein’s name and number 6 adorning it, and a red ballcap with NATIONALS spelled out phonetically in Hebrew letters. But the rain is unrelenting, and there will be no pregame honorifics for Epstein or anyone else. In the end, a little after 9 p.m., this Monday game between the Nats and the Orioles—yes, my plan was to exorcise the demons from both franchises at once—is called for weather. It will be rescheduled as part of a Thursday doubleheader, a day which will find Epstein back in Colorado.

God will have no apologies from me.

Yea, as it shall ever be written: Man plans, grabs a bat and walks to the plate. God plunks him in the ribs with a nasty slider, and then, two pitches later, picks him off with an omnipotent little move toward first.



TSUNDOWN the next day, Mike Epstein and I find ourselves at Har Shalom Synagogue in the Potomac suburbs of Washington. We are side by side as the congregation rises for the Kol Nidre, the All Vows prayer, in which Jews ask God to forgive them for all of the promises that they, being human

and foolish and fallible, will fail to honor in the coming year. Kol Nidre is so elemental to the Jewish ritual of forgiveness that we chant the prayer thrice, slowly, so that the words are given all possible attention and clarity.

As I gather my prayer shawl on my shoulders and turn the page of my prayer book, Epstein shoots me a look and actually smiles. “O.K., you’re up,” he says. “It’s on you now.”

Kol Nidre applies to the unkept vows of the coming year, but I’m asking for a retroactive dispensation. My great sin dates to my 10th year of life, and I know I didn’t even learn the Yom Kippur liturgy until I was 12 or 13. Hey, with all those unexplained absences, I wasn’t the brightest bulb in the Solomon Schechter Hebrew Academy. Sue me.

Yet on this night, I bend to the task. Beside me, I can hear my companion muttering the Hebrew as well; neither of us is particularly observant, but Epstein too has knowledge of the liturgy. But walking out of temple an

MEMORY MAN

Simon imagined Epstein’s Opening Day home run ... but the slugger did go deep in the second game of the ’70 season (below).

hour and a half later, he only partially concedes the validity of our mission together:

“I get why you’re here, but explain to me exactly why I had to make this trip? I did my job. I hit a home run. And God, he did his job, right? You’re the only one here who still owes.”

I do my best:

“You’re part of the sin, too,” I say. “I prayed for a home run in a meaningless August ball game, and I got it. But maybe you got something too. Maybe you benefited from the sin.”

He looks at me, ever more dubious.

“Look,” I say, “that year you hit 20 home runs, and early the next season you get traded to Oakland to play on a winning team. The year after that, you win a World Series, right?”

He nods.



“Maybe if you finish 1970 with only 19 home runs, maybe that’s not such a clean, round number. Maybe when the Oakland front office is looking around for a lefty to hit behind Reggie Jackson and play first base, maybe they don’t bite on Mike Epstein. Maybe if I don’t ask God to have that Royals pitcher hang a curveball, you don’t get traded, you don’t hit 26 jacks in ’72 and go to the World Series and get a ring.”

Epstein considers my theories on man and fate for only a moment.

“Weak. Very weak,” he says, laughing.

I drop him at his hotel and we say our goodbyes. And then, before getting back in my car, I shoot a look up at the dark Washington sky.

“C’mon, big guy,” I actually say aloud. “What’s done is done. Let my people go.”

At that moment, the O’s 2015 wild-card run is history, and with some irony, their last series with the Nats will fire the last torpedo into Washington’s hopes as well. But next year might be different. I tell this to myself and drive home with hope in my heart.

Five days later, the Nationals’ closer tries to choke the team’s best hitter in the dugout, for all the world to see.

Oh, God.

□



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Divided We Stand

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG

THE PIRATES and the Cubs finished this season with the second- and third-best records in major league baseball, respectively, and their reward is a one-game wild-card playoff against each other. This is not fair, but as every Cubs fan already knows, life is not fair.

The Cubs reside in baseball's best neighborhood (Wrigleyville) and its toughest (the National League Central). The 100-win Cardinals relegated Chicago and Pittsburgh to the wild card. This, we are told, is an outrage wrapped in an injustice, an affront to our Founding Fathers, and it has spurred talk of getting rid of divisions altogether. Just seed the teams by record and be happy about it.

This is already happening in the NBA. Starting next spring, NBA teams can hang a DIVISION CHAMPIONS banner wherever they like, but it won't necessarily get them an extra home game in the playoffs. The NFL has a similar problem: Every year, it seems, some 8–8 or 9–7 team hosts a playoff game simply because it won a lousy division.

So what should leagues do to fix this problem?

Here is an idea: nothing.

When the Dodgers were trying to wrap up the NL West this year, their quest was more compelling because they had to fend off the Giants. As the Cubs try to build a dynasty, they must first conquer their longtime tormentors from St. Louis. The Yankees and the Red Sox begin every season knowing they can't both win the AL East, and that helps make the rivalry special. And this year Blue Jays fans had to get a little extra joy from wresting the division title from New York and Boston.

If you want, you can put 30 teams in a single league, have them all play an equal number of times and seed the postseason based on wins and losses. That might be a "fairer" way to determine a champion, but it wouldn't be as entertaining. Clinching the second- or third-best record in a supersized league is not nearly as satisfying as winning a division, and it never will be.

This country was built on a few simple concepts: freedom of speech, freedom of religion and loving thy neighbor, except when you play thy neighbor in a sporting event, at

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will be.**



**Should MLB
and the NFL get
rid of divisions
altogether?**

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which time you want to punch him in the face. Where would we be as a nation if Packers fans did not hate the Bears, Alabama fans did not hate Auburn, and Philadelphia fans did not hate everybody? We might not even be a country. We'd still be under British rule, and who knows what language we would speak?

English?

I guess you're right. Anyway, the point is: Rivalries make sports fun when they otherwise wouldn't be. And everywhere you look, they are getting devalued. Missouri and Kansas stopped playing each other. So did Texas and Texas A&M, and Oklahoma and Nebraska. And even the ones that continue are not the same—thanks to expansion, Michigan–Ohio State and USC–UCLA can only decide half of a conference title in football.

We should keep rivalries as relevant as we can. It should hurt Green Bay fans a little more when Brett Favre signs with the Vikings of the NFC North. The current Clippers–Warriors tussle would not be as heated if they did not share a division. Sometimes a rivalry rises above regional alignment—like Lakers–Celtics or, more recently, Patriots–Colts. But divisions usually play a big part. And they only matter if some kind of postseason carrot awaits the winner.

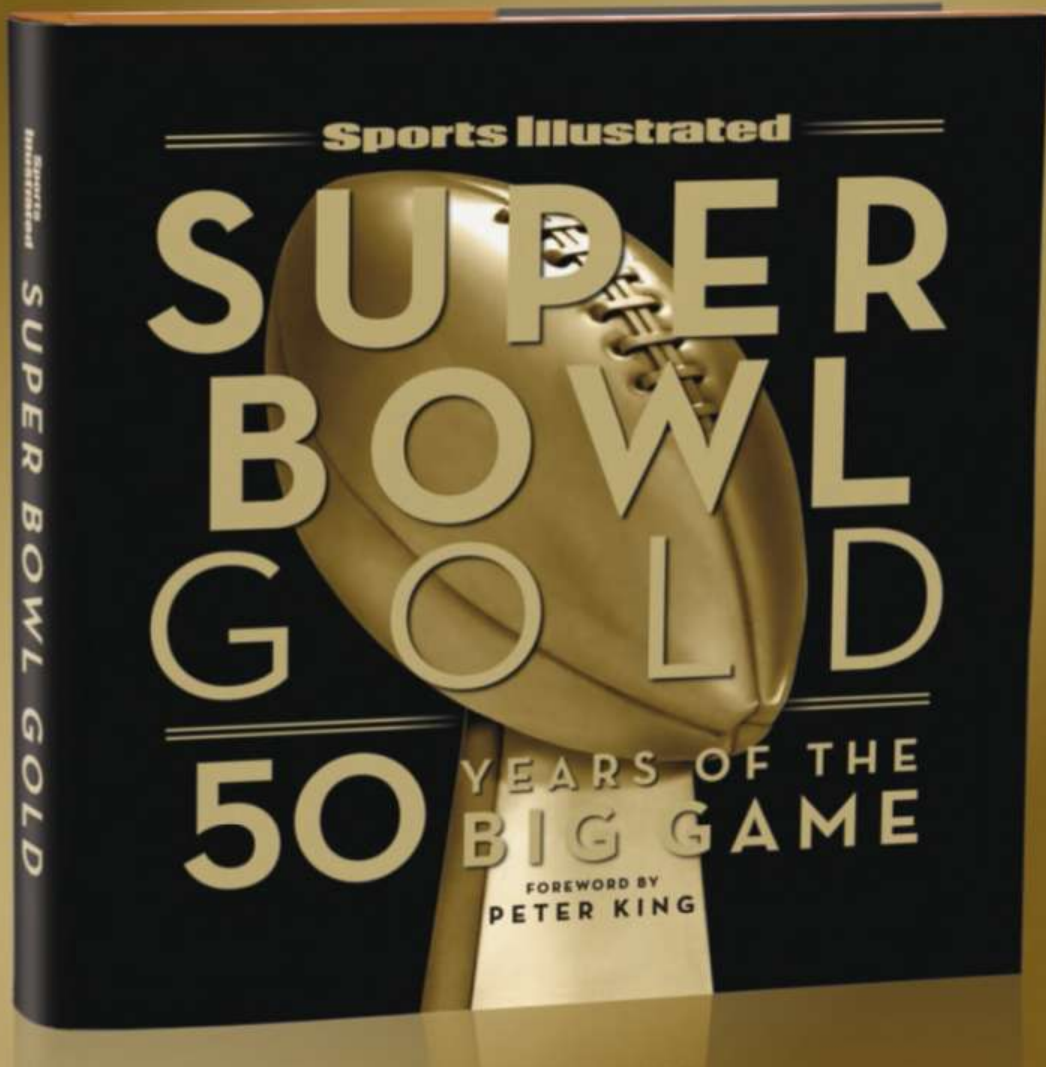
Sure, the NL playoffs would seem more equitable if the Pirates and the Cubs did not have to play the wild-card game. But a little quirkiness in the system is not just O.K., it's good. It's an acknowledgement that sports exist for some reason apart from determining a single champion. And if Pittsburgh and Chicago fans wonder why their teams couldn't get into the postseason's main draw, they have an answer: The rival Cardinals blocked them. And what a beautiful thing that is. □



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